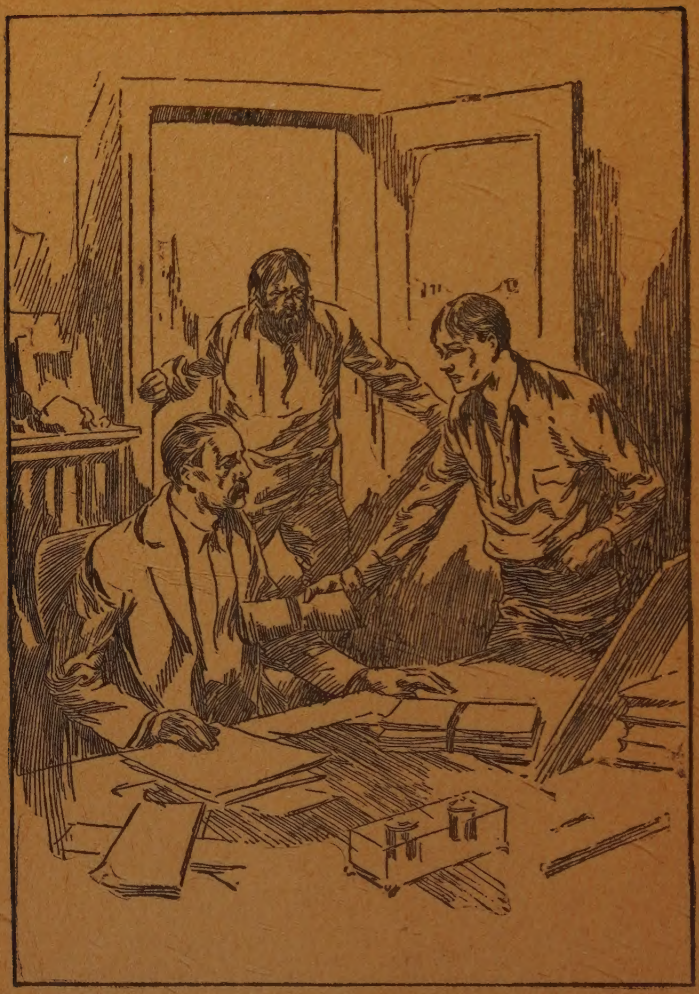
The PONY-RIDER-BOYS IN ALASKA

FRANK GEE PATCHIN

$3.00

THE PONY RIDER BOYS SERIES



"I File the Claim!" Shouted Tad.

Frontispiece.

The Pony Rider Boys in Alaska

OR

The Gold Diggers of Taku Pass

By

FRANK GEE PATCHIN

Author of The Pony Rider Boys in the Rockies, The Pony Rider Boys in Texas, The Pony Rider Boys in Montana, The Pony Rider Boys in the Ozarks, The Pony Rider Boys in the Alkali, The Pony Rider Boys in New Mexico, The Pony Rider Boys in the Grand Canyon, The Pony Rider Boys with the Texas Rangers, The Pony Rider Boys on the Blue Ridge, The Pony Rider Boys in New England, The Pony Rider Boys in Louisiana, etc., etc.

Illustrated

THE SAALFIELD PUBLISHING COMPANY
Akron, Ohio New York

Made in U. S. A.

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PRINTED IN THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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THE PONY RIDER BOYS IN ALASKA

CHAPTER I

THROUGH ENCHANTING WATERS

"CAPTAIN, who are the four silent men leaning over the rail on the other side of the boat?" asked Tad Butler. "I have been wondering about them almost ever since we left Vancouver. They don't seem to speak to a person, and seldom to each other, though somehow they appear to be traveling in company. They act as if they were afraid someone would recognize them. I am sure they aren't bad characters."

Captain Petersen, commander of the steamer "Corsair," which for some days had been plowing its way through the ever-changing northern waters, stroked his grizzled beard reflectively.

"Bad characters, eh?" he twinkled. "Well, no, I shouldn't say as they were. They're fair-

weather lads. I'll vouch for them if necessary, and I guess I'm about the only person on board that knows who they are."

Tad waited expectantly until the skipper came to the point of the story he was telling.

"They are the Gold Diggers of Taku Pass, lad."

"The Gold Diggers of Taku Pass?" repeated Tad Butler. "I don't think I ever heard that name before. Where is this pass, sir?"

The skipper shook his head.

"No one knows," he said.

"That is strange," wondered Butler. "Does no one know where they dig for gold?"

"No. They don't even know themselves," was the puzzling reply.

Tad fixed the weather-beaten face of the skipper with a questioning gaze.

"I don't think I understand, sir."

"I'll tell you what I know about it some other time, lad. I haven't the time to spin the yarn now. It's a long one. I've been sailing up and down these waters, fair weather and foul, for a good many years, and I've seen a fair cargo of strange things in my time, but this Digger outfit is the most peculiar one I ever came across. They are a living example of what the lure of gold means when it gets into a man's system. Gold is all right. I

wish I had more of it; but, my boy, don't ever let the love of it get to the windward of you if you hope to enjoy peace of mind afterwards," concluded the skipper with emphasis.

"What's that he says about gold?" interjected Stacy Brown, more commonly known to his companions as Chunky, the fat boy.

Stacy, with Ned Rector and Walter Perkins, had been lounging against the starboard rail of the "Corsair," observing Tad and the Captain as they talked. A few paces forward sat Professor Zepplin, their traveling companion, wholly absorbed in a scientific discussion with an engineer who was on his way to an Alaskan mine, of which the latter was to assume control. Many other passengers were strolling about the decks of the "Corsair." There were seasoned miners with bearded faces; sharp-eyed, sharp-featured men with shifty eyes; pale-faced prospectors on their way to the land of promise, in quest of the yellow metal; capitalists going to Alaska to look into this or that claim with a view to investment; and, more in evidence than all the rest, a large list of tourists bound up the coast on a merry holiday. The former, in most instances, were quiet, reserved men, the latter talkative and boisterous.

"The Captain was speaking of the lure that gold holds for the human race," replied Tad

Butler in answer to Stacy Brown's question. "I guess the Captain is right, too."

"Be warned in time, Chunky," added Rector.

"I've never seen enough gold to become lured by it," retorted the fat boy. "I should like to see enough to excite me just once. I shouldn't mind being lured that way. Would you, Walt?"

Walter Perkins shook his head and smiled.

"I fear you will have to shake yourself—get over your natural laziness—before you can hope to," chuckled Ned. "I doubt if you would know a lure if you met one on Main Street in Chillicothe."

"Try me and see," grinned Stacy.

"There must be a lot of gold up here, judging from what I have read, and from the number of persons going after it," added Tad, with a sweeping gesture that included the deckload of miners and prospectors. "But the hardships and the heart-breakings must be terrible. I have read a lot about the terrors that men have gone through in this country, especially in the awful winters they have in Alaska."

"I shouldn't mind them if I had a sledge and a pack of dogs to tote me around, the way they do up here," declared Chunky.

"That would be great fun," agreed young

Perkins. "You wouldn't have far to fall if you got bucked off from that kind of broncho, would you, Stacy?"

"Not unless you fell off a mountain," answered Ned, glancing at the distant towering cliffs of the coast range.

"I was asking the Captain about those four men yonder," said Tad.

"Oh, the fellows who don't speak to anyone?" nodded Rector.

"Yes."

"Who are they? I have wondered about them."

"I don't know their names, but the skipper tells me they are known as the Gold Diggers of Taku Pass," replied Butler. "The queer part of it is, he says, that no one, so far as he is aware, knows even that there is such a place as Taku Pass. They don't know themselves," added Tad with a smile.

"That's strange," wondered Rector. "Crazy?"

"No, I think not. They are prospecting for an unknown claim," replied Tad.

"I—I don't know anything about that," spoke up Stacy Brown. "But I know who those fellows are."

"You do?" exclaimed the boys in chorus.

"Yes. I asked them. That's the way to

find out what you want to know, isn't it?" chuckled Stacy.

"Who are they?" asked Butler laughingly.

"The minery-looking fellow is Sam Dawson. The one beside him is Curtis Darwood. The tall, slim chap nearest to us is Dill Bruce. They call him the Pickle for short."

"He looks sour enough to be one," laughed Walter.

"The other chap, the little one, is Curley Tinker. And there you have the whole outfit. I'll introduce you to them if you like," volunteered Chunky.

"No, thank you. I already have tried to talk with the men, but they don't seem inclined to open their mouths," replied Butler.

"It strikes me that you have made more progress that anyone else on this boat, so far as the four gold diggers are concerned," added Rector, addressing Chunky.

"Yes, I am convinced that Chunky is rather forward," agreed Tad.

"Oh, no one can resist me," averred the fat boy. "Anything else you want to know, Tad?"

"Yes, a great deal. But here is the Captain. He will tell me."

Captain Petersen had taken a fancy to the boys almost from the first. He had learned who they were early on that voyage, and in the

meantime they had become very well acquainted with the commander of the "Corsair." He had taken pains to explain to the lads many things about the country past which they were sailing—things that otherwise they would not have known, and the voyage was proving very interesting to them, as well as to Professor Zepplin himself.

"Come below now and I'll tell you the story," invited Captain Petersen, starting to descend the after companionway. "All of you come along. That will save your asking questions later on," he smiled.

"You see, he invited you on my account," chuckled Stacy Brown, tapping his breast with the tips of his fingers.

The lads filed down the companionway behind the Captain, and when they had finally settled themselves in the skipper's cabin and he had lighted his pipe, he began to speak.

"I always come below and put my feet on the table after we pass the Shoal of Seals," he explained. "That is the time I take my 'watch below,' as we call it, when we come down for a rest or a sleep. But you are eager to hear the story. Very good. Here goes. A good many years ago an expedition came up to this part of the world on an exploring mission. In that party was a Dr. Darwood from some place in

the East. I don't believe I ever heard the name of the place, and if I knew the state I have forgotten it. Well, to make a long story short, the party was ambushed by the Kak-wan-tan Indians. Every man of the party was captured and all were put to death, with the exception of Dr. Darwood. Somehow, the Indians had learned that he was a big medicine man, so they made the Doctor captive and took him over the mountains many miles from there. They probably killed the others so as to make sure of the Doctor."

"What did they want with a medicine man?" interjected the fat boy.

"They wanted him professionally. Their chief was a very sick man. I guess the old gentleman was about ready to die. At least he thought so. The chief bore the name of Chief Anna-Hoots. Nice name, eh? No wonder he got sick."

"He must have belonged to the owl family," observed Chunky.

Tad rebuked the fat boy with a look. The Captain regarded Stacy quizzically, then proceeded with his story.

"Their own medicine man had been killed by a bear. You see his medicine wasn't calculated to head off bears. The chief, therefore, was in a bad way. Dr. Darwood was com-

manded to make the chief well, and, so the story goes, after examining Hoots, he at once saw what was the trouble with the old man. He set to work over the savage, not so much from a professional interest as that he knew very well his life would be forfeited did he not do something for the patient. It is a safe guess that the Doctor never had worked more heroically over a patient. Well, he saved the chief—had him on his feet and hopping around as lively as a jack-rabbit in less than twenty-four hours. There was great rejoicing among Anna's people, and Darwood was feasted and made much of. He was almost as big a man as Old Hoots himself. Nothing was too good for him in that camp."

"Why didn't he poison the whole tribe while he had the chance?" questioned Rector.

"Perhaps it wasn't professional," smiled the Captain in reply. "But Chief Anna-Hoots—precious old rascal that he was—was so grateful that he made the Doctor chief medicine man over all the tribes and a tribal chief of one of the subordinate tribes. And now we are coming to the point of our story. Old Hoots, later on, let the Doctor into a great secret. Having driven the evil spirits out of Anna and set him on his feet almost as good as new, the patient evidently was of the opinion that the medicine

man was entitled to something more than the ordinary fee for such a service. He took the Doctor to a place where a roaring glacial stream of icy water was tearing down through a narrow gash in the mountains on its way to the sea, and there he showed the doctor-chief gold in great quantities, so the story runs, the pass being guarded by the Bear Totem. It is not certain whether the vein from which this gold had been washed was then known. I think Darwood must have found it later on and located a claim. He at least took from the mouth of the pass enough gold to make him a fairly rich man. This he hid away, awaiting a favorable opportunity to get away with it. Such opportunity presented itself while his tribe was away on a hunt in the fall for meat for the winter, and made his escape. After some months of terrible hardships he succeeded in reaching civilization, fairly staggering under the weight of the gold he had brought away. He had the gold-madness badly, you see."

"He was plucky," muttered Butler.

"Yes. It was Darwood's intention to return, at the head of a well-armed party, properly equipped, and work the pay dirt to its limit. But he died before he could do so. The hardships of that journey, loaded down with dust and nuggets, led to his ultimate death. You

see what avarice will do to a fellow. It gets to windward of him every time."

"I'd be willing to stagger under all I could carry and take my chances on the future," observed Chunky reflectively.

"So would we all," nodded the skipper. "That's the worst of us, our greed. I am glad I am at sea, where I *can't* dig. Nothing was done in the matter of locating and working the claim for some years after the Doctor's death. Then a grandson, Curtis Darwood, who is now aboard this boat, found a paper or map or something of the sort, on which was a description of the Doctor's find. It couldn't have been very definite or they wouldn't have been so long in locating the place. Of course, the younger man was fired with the desire to find this wonderful mine. The lure had him fast and hard. He came up here alone the first time and prospected all summer, but failed, and late that fall he went back home. When he returned the three other men, who are his companions now, were with him. They have been together ever since in their prospecting work. Dawson is a pioneer prospector who knows the game thoroughly. The others, who have been up here three years, might now be placed in the same class, though Dawson is the real miner. One can't help but admire their pluck and persist-

ence, but I shouldn't want to be caught interfering with them. When a fellow gets the gold madness he is a dangerous customer to annoy."

"Have they found the gold?" asked Walter Perkins.

Captain Petersen shook his head.

"I think not. If they have, only they know it. They take no one into their confidence. They went home for the winter last fall, and what amazes me further is that they are getting up here so late this spring. Here it is June. They should have been on the job six weeks ago, and in order to do so they ought to have wintered in the hills. To me that means something. It will be a wonder if this unusual move on their part doesn't attract attention. You may believe they are watched. There are, no doubt, those who are watching the Diggers, and who do not miss any of their movements." The skipper hesitated, then brought a big fist down on his cabin table with a bang that set the glassware jingling. "By George, I begin to see a light!" he roared.

"What do you mean?" cried Chunky.

"What is it, sir?" chorused Tad and Ned in one voice.

"That accounts for Red Whiskers. That accounts for his presence on—" The skipper checked himself suddenly. "But no matter.

It isn't for me to say." He lapsed into thoughtful silence. "Well, what do you think of the story?" he asked a few moments later.

"It is all very remarkable," answered Butler. "Where are they going—their destination, I mean?"

"You never can tell. They have explored pretty much all of the country within a few hundred miles of here, and it wouldn't surprise me at all if they had stumbled over the right place dozens of times and didn't know it. But there is one significant fact. They have brought up a lot of equipment this time. It looks as if they thought they had the place pretty well located. It certainly does look that way. There's another thing I forgot to tell you. This place, this pass where the gold is supposed to lie, is the abode of a great and angry spirit."

"A really, truly spirit?" questioned Walter wonderingly.

"I can't say about the really-truly business," replied Captain Petersen, with a grin. "I am telling you the story as I have heard it. Had Old Hoots' tribe known that the Doctor went in there and dug out gold which he salted away they would have put him to death. It's a sacred place. It was then, and I'll wager it is now. You may believe that the superstition has been handed down."

"But the Indians up here now are not at all savage, are they?" asked Butler.

"Perhaps not where the white man has taken possession in force. But you get into the far interior—there is a great deal of Alaska that the white man knows very little about yet—and you will find them savage enough, provided they think they have you in a pocket, and especially so if you interfere with any of their religious customs or beliefs. In these respects they are simply human."

"I should call them inhuman," observed the fat boy.

"I don't blame them," nodded Tad.

"Now, that is the story of the Gold Diggers, so far as I know it," continued the Captain. "As I have already said, not many persons up here do know it. A veil of mystery surrounds the four silent men. They make no other friends, confide in no one, and live in a little world all their own. The story, as I have repeated it to you, was told to me by a man from their part of the country who came up here to spend the summer last season. That is how I came to know the details. It is possible, though not probable, that you might get them to tell you something about the country."

"I'll make them talk," answered Stacy pompously.

"What is their destination?" asked Butler quickly.

"Skagway. However, that undoubtedly is a blind. They may be going on farther from that point, or they may be intending to work back along the coast after they leave the ship, then strike into the hills at some remote point. I can't say as to that, of course. They will disappear. You may depend upon that, and nothing may be heard of them again for a year."

"What do they do for provisions?" questioned Rector.

"The same as you will have to do if you penetrate far into the interior. They hunt and fish, saving their canned supplies for the winter, for the winter months are long and drear up in this far northern country."

"When does winter set in?" asked Ned.

"Very early. It seems to be most always winter up here."

"Thank you very much," said Tad. "This has been most interesting. I should like to ask them something about the country where we are going. Of course I shouldn't presume to question them about their own affairs. That would be none of my business."

"Where are you going?"

"We had planned to strike north from Yakutat."

"You will find rough country that way. I should say you would have tough traveling all the way. If you can get the Gold Diggers to open up, they will undoubtedly be able to give you some useful information that would enable you to lay your course to the best advantage. But I think I know the Diggers. You may not be able to get a civil word out of them."

"They'll talk to me," answered the fat boy confidently.

"Please don't permit yourself to be overcome," warned Rector. "Remember your most excellent opinion of yourself has been the cause of some mighty falls already."

"Well, I fell in soft spots anyhow," retorted Stacy.

"Ordinarily on your head, I believe," answered Ned quickly.

Again thanking the Captain for his kindness, the lads returned to the deck. Tad leaned against the rail thinking over the story related by the skipper. The romance of the quest of the Diggers appealed to Butler's adventure-loving nature. He declared to himself that he would draw them into conversation and satisfy his further curiosity. Looking them over in the light of what he had heard, Tad saw that the four were determined-looking men, were men who would do and dare, no matter how great

the obstacles or the perils. He could not but feel a keen admiration for them. They were real men, even if they were surly and reticent.

"Tad, how would you like to belong to that party of prospectors?" asked Ned, nodding toward the four.

"I can't imagine anything more exciting. I wish we might. I wonder if they are going our way?"

"Why don't you ask them?"

"I intend to," answered Tad, rousing himself and starting towards the prospectors who were lounging apart from the other passengers on the deck of the steamer.

"Watch him get turned down," grinned Stacy. "I shall have to break the ice for him. He never will be able to do it for himself."

"Better wait until you are asked," advised Ned Rector.

As Stacy had said, Tad did not succeed in getting into conversation with the Diggers that day. Early on the following morning the boys were on deck, being unwilling to miss a single moment of the scenery.

The "Corsair" was swinging majestically into Queen Charlotte Sound, a splendid sweep of purple water, where great waves from the Pacific rolled in, sending the steamer plunging desperately. There was a scurry on the part

of many of the early risers to get below decks, for the change from the quiet waters through which the boat had been sailing to this tumultuous sea was more than most of them were able to stand. Stacy Brown was already on his back in the shadow of a life boat, groaning miserably. Walter Perkins' face was pale, but he held himself together by a strong effort of will, but Tad Butler and Ned Rector appeared not in the least affected by the roll of the steamer. Both were lost in admiration of the scene that was unfolding before them.

"They roll along with the lightness of thistledown across a green field," declared Tad enthusiastically, speaking to himself. "It is simply glorious."

He heard someone come to the rail at his side, but the lad was too fully absorbed to look around.

"That wasn't bad for a sentiment, young fellow," said a voice at his elbow. "If you stay up in this country long enough, however, you will get all the sentiment frozen out of you. I know, for I've been all through it. I'm lucky that my bones aren't up yonder somewhere."

"Yes, sir," answered Butler.

Glancing around he found himself gazing into the face of Curtis Darwood.

CHAPTER II

THE BOYS SCENT A PLOT

"OH, how do you do, sir. Did I say anything?"

"Well, there's a chance for a difference of opinion as to that," smiled the miner.

"I have been enjoying the scenery, sir. Isn't it beautiful?"

"You should see it at sunrise," answered Darwood. "These mists are well worth coming all the way up here to gaze upon. In the morning they take on all the delicate tints of the primrose. Then at sunset of course the colors grow warmer—amber, orange, gold—almost everything that could be imagined in the way of wonderful colorings. All that sort of thing, you know. I never saw anything like it in any part of the world, and I've seen some," added the Gold Digger reflectively.

"I should like to see it at sunset," answered Tad. "Is it ever like this in the interior, sir?"

"Interior of what?"

"Of the country? Up there in the mountains?"

Darwood gave the boy a quick glance of inquiry. There was suspicion in his eyes.

"In the far country?" added Butler.

"I can't say as to that; I can't say that I know," replied the prospector shortly.

"What we wanted to ask you about was the Yakutat trail from the coast up?" interjected Ned. "You see, we are going that way and we want to get all the information we can about the trails and the country itself."

Tad gave his companion a warning look, but Ned persisted in pressing his questioning. The miner's hands dropped from the rail.

"I reckon you would better ask someone else. I can't tell you anything about the trail," replied Darwood, turning on his heel and striding away.

"There, you've done it now," complained Butler ruefully. "Of course you had to break in and spoil it all. Now we shan't get another opportunity. Mr. Darwood is suspicious of us, and he won't talk with us again. It's too bad."

"Well, you wanted to know. What's the use in beating about the bush when you want to know a thing. I believe in asking for what you want," protested Ned.

"So do I, but it isn't always best to go at it bald-headed. However, never mind, Ned. I am now convinced that there would be little use

in asking Mr. Darwood questions in any circumstances. The instant you begin to talk Alaska with that man he is going to shy off. He fears he might be trapped into an admission, or else he thinks we are trying to pump him for some other reason. You may be sure that others have tried to draw him out, believing they might obtain information that he is supposed to possess."

"They are a queer lot," muttered Ned. "Didn't the Captain say no one knew anything about this gold pass, or whatever you call it?"

"Taku Pass? Yes. That is, he said few persons knew of it, but you may be sure that the purpose of these men up here is known. There are plenty of gentlemen waiting to beat those four into the land of golden promise. I don't blame the Diggers for having their suspicions of everyone about them. I wish I could convince them that we aren't that sort of people. I like that fellow. I'd like to help him, too," mused Tad.

"I shouldn't. However, I'm sorry I put my foot in it," nodded Ned.

"You needn't be. See! We are running out of the swell now."

The steamer, soon coming under the lee of the islands, was steaming into Fitzhugh Sound, where dangerous shoals menace the navigators

of these enchanting waters. Captain Petersen was now occupying the little bridge just forward of the pilot house. His face was grim and set. The good fellow was no longer present—it was now the master, bent upon attending to his duties.

The sound is a slender waterway, extending directly northward fully thirty miles, more entrancing, it seemed to the boys, than any other water over which they had sailed. The Pony Rider Boys were having a glorious passage into the far north where they were going in search of new adventure. They were bound for the wildest and most remote section of Uncle Sam's domain, where they hoped to spend the summer months.

Now that the waters had become more quiet, Stacy Brown slowly dragged himself from the shadow of the life-boat and stood gripping the gunwale. After getting his head leveled somewhat he walked unsteadily to his companions who were leaning on the steamer's rail regarding him with smiling faces.

"Sick?" questioned Tad.

"No; merely ailing," replied the fat boy.

"I wouldn't be a landlubber," jeered Rector.

"You would, if you were in my place," muttered Stacy.

On through a panorama of changing scenes

and colors sailed the "Corsair." In Finlayson Channel, some distance farther on, the forest that lined the shores was a solid mountain of green on each side, the trees growing down to the water. Here the reflections were so brilliant that the dividing line between shore and water was difficult for the untrained eye to make out. The boys seemed to be gazing upon an optical illusion. From the water's edge the mountains rose sheer to a great height, their distant peaks capped with snow glistening in the morning sunlight, while glacial streams flashed over the open spaces on the mountain sides.

"Is there no end to it?" wondered Tad Butler, gazing at the scenery until his eyes ached.

"It is all very wonderful," agreed Professor Zepplin.

"I call it tiresome," declared the fat boy wearily. "I prefer something exciting."

Ned suggested that he jump overboard. Stacy replied that he would were it not that he didn't want to put his companions to the trouble of rescuing him.

The entrancing scenery continued at intervals until the evening of the second day after their unsuccessful attempt to draw out Curtis Darwood. They were now passing through Frederick Sound, bordered by spire-shaped

glaciers that towered in the sky, pale and chaste, more than two thousand feet above the sound. Darkness fell, the sky being overcast, and the air chill, giving the passengers the shivers and sending them to their cabins below. Tad Butler and Ned Rector had clambered to the top of the deck-house and settled themselves between the two smokestacks. It was a nice warm berth and they appreciated it. They seemed far away from human habitation there.

"You said you had something to tell me this evening," Ned reminded his companion, after a few moments of contented silence.

"Yes. It was about last night. You remember that remark of the skipper's the other day, don't you?"

"About what?"

"What he said about 'Red Whiskers'?"

"Yes."

"I have the gentleman located, Ned. I am reasonably certain that I have. Of course it's none of my business, but I have been curious ever since the Captain said that. My man has red whiskers, regular combustible whiskers," added the freckle-faced boy with a grin.

"There are several men on board this boat who wear red upholstery on their chins," averred Rector.

"I know that, but this one is the fellow, all right," declared Tad in a confident tone.

"You know something!" exclaimed Ned.

"I do. Don't speak so loudly. Someone might hear. I heard someone passing along the deck just below us a moment ago."

"No one down there could distinguish what we were saying," answered Ned, as the two drew back farther between the steel bases of the two funnels.

"Well?" urged Ned.

"The man referred to by Captain Petersen is Sandy Ketcham, the tall, lank fellow, with the squinty eyes and the stoop shoulders. He has a trick of peering up from under his eyelids when he looks at you."

"Oh! I know the one you mean, and I don't like his looks. How did you know?"

"Since the Captain made that remark about 'Red Whiskers' I have been taking an interest in every man on the boat who wore red whiskers," said Tad. "I tried to decide, in my own mind, which of them was the right one."

"So did I," admitted Ned. "But I got all mixed up. If you succeeded in picking out the right one you are mighty sharp. I wish I were as keen as you."

"Keen? Not a bit of it! It was a pure accident that I found out. I just blundered on the

truth last night. The man I had picked out wasn't the fellow at all. I had the wrong man, so you see I am not so smart as you thought. You remember you left Stacy and myself sitting on a bale of freight at the rear end of the boat when you went down late last evening?"

"Yes. Chunky was half asleep."

"Exactly. Well, I shook him up a few moments later and he went below grumbling because I wouldn't let him sleep when he was so comfortable. He was liable to catch cold in the damp air. Then I went to sleep myself," admitted Butler. "I'm not much of an adviser, am I?"

"Go on," urged Rector.

"Something awakened me. Two men were talking nearby. I couldn't see them, but could hear every word they said. One of the two I recognized by his voice. The other I was unable to place. I got him placed right to-day, though, when I heard him talking on deck. They are a precious pair of rascals, Ned. Perhaps it is considered fair enough up here to do those things, but I just can't hold myself when I see crookedness going on."

"You haven't said what it was about yet," reminded Ned.

"They were plotting against Darwood."

"You don't say?"

"Yes, they were."

"How?"

"I am not going to tell you now. The question is, ought I to tell Mr. Darwood? Would it be right to carry tales, even in a case like this?"

"Not knowing what the case is I can't very well advise you," answered Ned Rector. "What did they say?"

"I'd rather not say a word about that until I have decided what to do."

"You're a queer chap, Tad. You arouse my curiosity; then you won't satisfy it."

"You shall know all about it in good time. Hark! Was that you who kicked the collar of the stack?"

"No. I didn't hear anything. Who was the other man?"

"His name is Ainsworth. He is a prospector, too. They are together, he and the man Sandy. There are some others in the plot, as I learned from the conversation, but I hardly think they are on board. I take it that the others are to meet this party at Skagway, which proves to me that the plans of our friends, the four Gold Diggers, were learned by the plotters some time before the former set sail for the north country. Oh, it is a fine game of grab they are planning! But I believe that,

if Mr. Darwood be warned in time, he will be perfectly able to take care of himself. I am quite sure I shouldn't care to be the other fellow."

"I don't know why we should get so excited over it," grumbled Ned. "Darwood and his companions are no friends of ours. I should say that quite the opposite is the case."

"But they are real men, just the same," objected Tad. "I don't care whether they are friendly to us or not. Come on; let's get down."

Grasping awning spars the two lads swung down to the promenade of the upper deck. After they had cleared the deck-house a man dropped to the deck from the deck-house, on the opposite side.

After a few moments' stroll, during which the boys continued their conversation, they went below. On reaching his cabin, Butler discovered that he had lost his pocket knife. Thinking that it had slipped from his pocket while the two were lounging on the deck-house, Tad went back to look for it. He was the only person in sight on deck. That part of the deck was unlighted, save as a faint glow shone up through the engine room grating. The freckle-faced boy looked carefully about on top of the deck-house for several minutes, in search of

his lost knife, lighting match after match to aid him in his quest. He failed to find it. With a grunt of disappointment he again swung himself to the deck.

The instant his feet touched the deck, Tad Butler met with a violent surprise. He was suddenly grabbed from behind. A powerful arm gripped him like a vise, pinioning his own right arm to his side, while a big hand was clapped over his mouth, forcing the lad's head violently backwards with a jolt which for the moment he thought had dislocated his neck.

Tad struggled and fought with all his might, but to little purpose. The boy realized that he was in the hands of a man who was a giant for strength and who was slowly but surely forcing him toward the steamer's rail. The Pony Rider Boy felt a bushy beard over his shoulder and against his neck. Now he was against the rail, facing out over the water. Butler knew that, despite his struggles, he was going to be dropped over the side. Then a sudden idea came to him. Tad shot up his free left hand, fastening his fingers in the long beard of the man behind him. He heard a smothered exclamation over his shoulder, and for the instant the hand over his mouth was withdrawn.

"Help!" shouted Tad Butler. Then a blow on the head sent him limply to the deck.

CHAPTER III

IN DESPERATE STRAITS

TAD'S assailant hastily gathered the boy up. The man staggered slightly, as, after a hurried glance up and down the deck, he stepped toward the rail with his burden. Just then footsteps were heard.

"Hey! What are you doing there?" bellowed a voice. A man came running from somewhere in the after part of the ship. Butler's assailant dropped his burden, dodged into a passageway in the deck-house, closing the door behind him and disappearing before the newcomer reached the door and threw it open. Then the rescuer turned to the unconscious Tad Butler.

"Well, here's trouble!" he muttered. Taking up Tad's limp form he carried it to where the light from the grating shone up. "It's that freckle-faced kid. Somebody gave him a tough wallop," growled the man. Tad's rescuer was Sam Dawson, one of the Gold Diggers. "I reckon I'll fetch him around if his neck isn't broken."

Laying the lad down on the deck where he would have plenty of air, the Digger worked over the Pony Rider Boy for fully five minutes before Tad returned to consciousness. Butler was too dazed to realize what had occurred.

"I'll take you below now, my lad," said Dawson.

"No, no. Not yet," protested Tad. "Wait. I want to think."

"Who was the fellow who hit you?" demanded Dawson.

"I—I don't know," stammered Tad.

"What did he do it for?"

"I—I don't know. I—"

"You aren't very strong on information, are you?" grinned the prospector.

"I want—want to see Mr. Darwood."

"You can see him to-morrow. You'd better get into your bunk right smart. I'll help you down."

"Thank you. I'll go alone—in a minute," said Butler, pulling himself up by the rail to which he clung unsteadily. "I don't want anyone to know. I'll tell Mr. Darwood what I have to say."

"Have it your own way. I'm going to follow along behind, to see that you get down all right," answered the man.

"Thank you. I guess you saved me from

getting a wetting," said the boy, extending an impulsive hand. "Now I'll go to my cabin. Please don't say anything about this. Good-night."

Tad's progress below was slow and unsteady. Dawson watched him until the door of the cabin had closed behind the Pony Rider Boy.

"That's a raw deal," muttered the miner. "I'd like to punch the head of the fellow who would do that to a kid!"

Butler got into his bunk without awakening his companions. His head ached terribly, and it was a long time before he fell asleep. The next morning his head felt twice its ordinary size. The boys joked him on his appearance, but Tad merely smiled, refusing to say what had been the matter with him. Ned was suspicious. He knew that Butler had been engaged in a scuffle, but what it was he was unable to imagine. Tad had been strolling about the decks all the morning, as if in search of someone. He found the man he was seeking late in the forenoon. The man was sitting on a keg of nails on the after part of the upper deck, his back to Tad.

"Good morning, Mr. Ketcham," greeted the Pony Rider Boy.

The red-whiskered man whirled, letting the

hand that had been caressing his beard fall limply to his side.

"Beard hurt you?" questioned Tad sweetly.

"None of yer business!" was the surly reply.

"Mr. Ketcham, I know you and I know your game," began Butler in a low, even tone. "I know, too, that you are the man who assaulted me and tried to put me overboard."

"I don't know what ye're talking about," growled Sandy.

"Oh, yes you do—and so do I! I've a handful of whiskers which match perfectly those you are wearing. Shall I pull some more for comparison with those I already have?" questioned the boy aggravatingly.

Ketcham half rose, then settled back again, as if fearing to trust himself.

"You may be thankful that you didn't do it. My companions would have taken care of you, had anything happened to me," Tad went on composedly. "I want to say, now, that it would be good judgment on your part not to try any more strong-arm tactics on me or on my companions. If you do, you will instantly find yourself in more kinds of trouble than you have ever before experienced. Now that we know you, we shall be able to take care of you as you deserve. I reckon you know what that means, Red Whiskers."

"Get out of here, before I do something to you!" roared Sandy.

"Oh, no you won't! You don't dare raise your hand. I could turn you over to the Captain and have you placed in irons till we get ashore. I have proof enough to send you to a jail, if they have such places up here. But I'm not going to do that. I am going to be fair with you and tell you exactly what I propose. I am going to tell Curtis Darwood about you. No, I shan't tell him who it is. I will tell him that someone is following and watching him—you and Ainsworth. He will find you out, never fear. I will give you one chance. Get off at the next stop, and I will tell him after we leave there. Take your choice. Take your friend with you. I don't want to be responsible for any shooting on this boat. What do you say, Mr. Sandy?"

The fellow's fingers opened and closed nervously. He attempted to speak but failed three times. Finally he blurted out his answer:

"Will you git out of here? I'll lose myself in a minit; then I won't answer for what I do."

"Never mind," answered Tad laughingly. "I can take care of myself. *Your* kind never did scare me worth a cent."

Sandy sprang up. He hesitated for a few tense seconds, then strode forward with Butler's soft chuckle in his ears.

The two men did get off when the boat stopped late that afternoon. Tad was at the rail watching them. Sam Dawson was also an observer of the scene. He saw the threatening scowl that Ketcham gave the smiling Tad, and drew his own conclusions, and at the same time decided that the freckle-faced boy was pretty well able to hold his own. Dawson really suspected part of the reason for this hasty disembarking, though he thought it was because Tad had threatened to expose the man Ketcham.

It was after supper when Tad called Ned Rector aside.

"I promised to tell you, Ned. Come with me and listen to what I am going to tell Mr. Darwood."

Ned went willingly. Darwood was sitting on deck. Tad halted before him, Darwood glancing up at the boys with languid interest.

"May I speak with you?" asked the lad politely.

"I reckon there's nothing to prevent," was the careless answer.

Tad went direct to the point of his story.

"A night or so ago I chanced to overhear two men who were passengers on this boat talking of you and the gentlemen who were with you. They were planning to follow and

watch you. They thought you had discovered the claim for which you have been looking for so long."

Darwood shot an angry glance at the boy.

"Go on," he growled.

"From their conversation I inferred that perhaps you already had discovered this claim and were on your way with equipment to work it. I further understood that they were to be met by others on shore and that the party was then to divide up and cover the movements of yourself and your friends. One of these fellows, I think, overheard me telling part of this story to my friend, Ned, last night, and the man tried to throw me overboard, after nearly squeezing me to death and then punching my head. I merely wanted to warn you to be on the lookout, and at the same time to tell you that neither of the two men is on board now. You may draw your own conclusions, sir."

Ned Rector's face had flushed when Tad described the assault on himself.

"Is that all?" asked Darwood indifferently.

"Yes; I think so."

"Thank you," said the Gold Digger, getting up slowly and strolling forward.

Ned laughed; Tad flushed.

"That's what you get for meddling with other folks' business," declared Rector.

"I reckon you are right at that," answered Tad. Then he laughed heartily. Nor did he exchange another word with the Gold Diggers of Taku Pass during the rest of that journey on the "Corsair."

CHAPTER IV

ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL

IT was the early morn of a week later when the "Corsair" sailed into Skagway harbor. Exclamations of delight were heard from every person who had not been there before. This beautiful spot is located at the mouth of the Skagway River, with mountains rising on all sides, from which countless cascades rush foaming and sparkling down to the sea, or drop sheer from such heights that one is forced to catch his breath.

Skagway itself the Pony Rider Boys found gay with pretty cottages climbing over the foot-hills; well-worn, flower-strewn paths leading to the heights; the river's waters rippling over grassy flats; flower gardens beyond the power of their vocabularies to describe. Added to this, there was a sweetness in the air, which, as Stacy Brown expressed it, "makes a fellow feel like sitting down and doing nothing for the rest of his life."

There were many trips to be taken from the city, perhaps the most historic in all that wild

country. The boys journeyed out into the interior on the famous White Pass railway, climbed Mount Dewey to Dewey Lake, and took a look at the hunting grounds where mountain sheep were to be had providing one were quick enough on the trigger to get the little animals before they leaped away. The next morning they turned their attention to the task of purchasing such of their outfit as they had not yet procured.

Having been referred to a man who kept Alaskan ponies for sale, they tramped out to the end of the long street on which the stores were located. There, sure enough, was a large herd of them in a paddock in a vacant lot. There were a good many vacant lots in Skagway. The boys climbed the paddock fence and looked over the lot.

"Me for that black one over yonder," cried Chunky.

"Why the black one?" asked Ned. "I thought you liked the lighter colors, the delicate tints?"

"I do when some other fellow has to groom the animals. For a labor-saving color give me black every time. With a black horse I can sleep half an hour longer than any fellow who has a white one and yet be ready for breakfast as soon as he is."

"You're too lazy to change your mind," growled Ned Rector.

"You want the black one, you say?" questioned Tad.

"That's what I said."

"And you, Ned?"

"Oh, I don't care. I'll stand by your choice."

"So will I," spoke up Walter. "The Professor said you were to choose something in his class for him to ride, too."

"Buy him a mule!" yelled Chunky.

"Yes, that reminds me. We shall have to take a couple of mules. I wonder if we can get them here. There comes the owner of this herd. We'll talk to him."

The owner of the ponies had been expecting the visit of the boys. He had been told that they would require ponies and did not know that the Pony Rider Boys had formed conclusions about them in advance.

Tad introduced himself and his companions.

"I've got just what you want, boys," nodded the owner. "Every one of those fellows is kind and gentle and will stand without hitching."

"That isn't exactly what we are looking for. We are not particular about their being girls' horses. We want stock that has the gimp in it," Tad informed him.

"That's it, that's it. You've just hit it. Gimp! That's the word, and there's another that fits—ginger! They're just full of ginger, every one of them. There ain't any more lively nags in Alaska than these fellows."

"They must have changed within the last minute, then," smiled the Pony Rider Boy.

"How so?"

"Why, you were just telling us how gentle they are, then almost in the same breath you try to convince us that they are regular whirlwinds. However, we'll let that go. What I do want to know is what sort of mountain ponies they are. If they turn out not to be good mountain climbers you may look for some trouble when we get back here."

"Boys, every one of those nags has been brought up in this country. They can follow a mountain trail like a deerhound, and that's straight. I wouldn't sell you anything else."

"Oh, no, certainly not," answered Butler. "How much for the light-colored one?"

"The buckskin?"

"Yes."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars."

"I beg pardon?" asked Tad politely.

"Two hundred and fifty."

"I think you misunderstood me, sir. I didn't want to buy the whole herd."

"You wanted five ponies?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, there you are. The buckskin will cost you two-fifty and so will the black. You can have any of the rest for two hundred and they're cheap hosses at that."

"Lead them out."

"Then you'll take them at that?"

"I haven't said anything about taking them, yet. I said lead them out. I want to look them over."

The owner smiled, but nodded to his hostler to rope and show the animals to the young men. Tad examined a dozen head, out of which he got three ponies, motioning to the hostler to tether them to one side where he could look them over again.

"What's the matter with the others?" asked the man.

"Various things. Some are wind-broken, two have the distemper, and if you don't watch out your whole herd will be getting it. I shall be rather afraid to buy any stock of you on that account. How long have they had the disease?"

"I didn't know they had it at all," stammered the owner.

"You had better watch them pretty carefully, then. How old is that buckskin?"

"Just coming four."

"Did somebody tell you that, or did you learn it from your own observation?" questioned Tad Butler sweetly.

"I reckon I know a hoss's age when I look at his mouth," answered the man, but not quite with the same assurance that he had made his first statements. This clear-eyed, quiet young man, he began to understand, knew a little something about horses, or at least pretended to.

"Then, sir, you have neglected your horse education. The buckskin is twelve years old," declared Butler firmly.

"Mebby I might have made a mistake in looking at his mouth when I got him," answered the owner apologetically.

Suppressed grins might have been observed on the faces of the other boys, who were still sitting on the paddock fence. They were leaving all matters pertaining to the stock in Butler's hands, knowing full well that Tad's judgment was better than theirs.

In turn the lad once more examined the horses he had chosen, then added to them enough to make up their allotment.

"Stacy, you are quite sure you want the black?" he questioned.

The fat boy nodded.

"He has a slight ringbone," Tad informed him.

"All the better."

"Why do you say that? I never knew that a ringbone increased the value of a horse."

"A horse that wears rings must be a pretty classy horse," replied the fat boy. "Me for the horse with the jewelry. Put a pair of natty boots on him and there you have an outfit that would make a Mexican part with his spurs."

"Pshaw!" grunted Ned. "Very fancy, but not much good for real work."

"Stacy doesn't mean that," answered Tad with a tolerant smile.

"Yes, I do mean it."

"We need a pack mule," said Butler, turning to the owner. "Can you tell us where we may get one or two?"

"Why, I've got just the critters you want. They're in the yard just back of the stables. Say, Jim, drive out the mules."

There were five mules in the pack driven out for their examination. These started slowly moving about in a circle with heads well down, trailing each other as if following a regular routine.

"Fine young stock, hardy and true and quick," said the owner, rubbing his palms together.

"We don't want any quick one. We've had some experience with the quick kind," declared Stacy Brown. "They were so quick I couldn't get out of the way of their heels. No, siree, no quick mules for mine."

"I don't think you need worry much about these," smiled Tad. "How much do you ask for those fellows?"

"How many?"

"Two. I to take my pick."

"A hundred apiece."

"I wouldn't give that for the lot of them," scoffed Chunky.

"Keep still. You aren't making this bargain," rebuked Ned, giving the fat boy a poke in the ribs.

Tad made a brief calculation on a slip of paper, then he looked up severely.

"Five ponies at seventy-five dollars would amount to three hundred and seventy-five dollars. Two mules at forty each would be eighty more, making a total of four hundred and fifty-five dollars," said Butler. "I'll tell you what I will do. I will give you an even four hundred for the five ponies I have picked out and the two mules that I shall choose."

"Outrageous!" exploded the owner. "Why, those mules are worth half of the price you offer for the whole outfit."

"Nonsense! Those mules have been used on crushers in the mines. Any one could see that by watching them mill about in a circle—"

"Five hundred dollars," broke in the owner.

"Nothing doing, sir," answered Tad. "Four hundred even."

"I'll make it four-fifty-five and not a cent less."

"Come along, fellows. I know where we can get a better lot for the money, anyway," declared Tad with a note of finality in his tone.

"Don't I get my skate?" wailed Chunky.

"Not at the price he asks. Never mind, I'll find you something better for the money." Tad had already started away. His companions got slowly down from the fence and followed, while the owner of the stock stood mopping his forehead.

"Here, take 'em!" he cried. "I might as well give them away, I suppose. I need the money, but you're getting them for nothing."

"You are wrong. As it is we are paying you a hundred dollars more than the outfit is worth. Here is your money. Give me a receipt in full. We will get the stock out some time this afternoon."

"You're the hardest driver of a bargain I ever come up with," protested the man.

"You know you don't mean that. If we hadn't known something about horses you know you would have done us to a turn," answered Tad, laughing. "Yes, I do believe in driving a bargain, but I wouldn't ask a man to sell me a thing at a lower price than it was worth. Just keep these animals cut out if you will, unless you want to go to the bother of cutting them out again."

"I got my skate," grinned Chunky as they were walking back towards the hotel where they were to meet the Professor. The latter had given Butler the money for the stock earlier in the day, knowing full well that Tad could make a much better bargain than could he. Tad had made a fair bargain. He had obtained a good lot of stock and he planned, furthermore, to sell the animals after finishing their journey, which would reduce the cost at least to a nominal sum.

The rest of the day was devoted to gathering supplies and packing. The boys had brought their saddles, bridles and other equipment of this nature with them, including tents and lighter camp equipment. In the meantime they had looked about for a guide, but without success. They were told that no doubt they would be able to find a man for their purpose upon their arrival at Yakutat, a hundred miles

further on. The trail to that place, their informant told them, was a post trail which they would find no difficulty in following. The post rider would not be going through for another three days, and at any rate he undoubtedly would travel faster than they cared to do. It was decided, therefore, that they should start out without a guide on the morrow and make their way to Yakutat as best they might.

The start was made in the early morning, the great mountains and the waters beneath it bathed in wondrous tints such as one finds nowhere outside of these far northern regions. The boys were light-hearted, happy, and were looking forward eagerly to experiences in the wilds of Alaska that should wholly satisfy their longings for activity and adventure.

CHAPTER V

TRAVELING A DANGEROUS MOUNTAIN PASS

TO the right the well-known Chilkoot Pass extended up into the mountain fastness, the pass that had been traveled by so many in the early rush for the gold fields. Chilkoot a long distance to the northeast intersects the White Horse Pass. It is a rugged trail, but an easier one to travel than the one chosen by the Pony Rider Boys for the first stage of their journeyings.

The object of Professor Zepplin in choosing the route to the northwest was to take the boys into territory that had been little explored, and to give them their fill of what is really the wildest and most rugged region of the United States.

"By the way," called Rector after they had gotten well started and had dropped the village behind them, "what became of our friends?"

"The four gold diggers?" asked Butler.

"They must have gone on with the ship," said Walter.

"Yes, they must have," agreed Stacy.

"No, they didn't," answered Tad. "I saw Dawson in town yesterday. Funny thing, but he seemed not to see me. In fact he tried to avoid me."

"Did you let him?" questioned Chunky.

"Yes. Why should I wish to force myself on anyone who doesn't want to see me? Not I. They are queer fellows. It isn't because they don't like us, but rather because they are suspicious. They are afraid someone will get a line on where they are going. Wouldn't it be queer if we were to bump into them somewhere in the interior?"

"No danger of that," spoke up the Professor. "I heard Mr. Darwood say they were going out the Chilkoot Pass for a short distance, from which they might branch off."

Tad chuckled softly.

"Why do you laugh?" demanded the Professor.

"Oh, I was just thinking of something funny."

"Let's hear it," begged Stacy.

"I rather think I'll keep it to myself," answered Tad, smiling. "Let Stacy tell you one of his funny stories."

"All right, I'll tell you one," agreed Chunky readily.

"Leave the telling until you get to camp,"

advised the Professor. "This is a rough trail, and you need to give it your undivided attention."

"The Professor is right. We would do well to watch out where we are going," agreed Tad.

"Yes, I dread to think what would happen to our packs were one of those mules, in a moment of forgetfulness, to think he was traveling in a circle at the end of a sweep down in a mine," said Ned.

The trail they were now following was narrow. In fact, it was a mere gash in the side of the mountain, winding in and out with many a sharp turn, and there was barely room for the ponies to travel in single file. Above them towered the mountains for thousands of feet. Below them was a sheer precipice of fully two hundred feet, getting deeper all the time, as they continued on a gradual ascent.

"I don't think I should like to be the post rider on this trail," decided Ned, gazing wide-eyed at the abyss.

"Especially on a dark night," added Tad.

"Or any other kind of a night," piped the fat boy.

"Oh, I don't know about that," answered Walter. "On a dark night you couldn't see the gorge. What we don't know doesn't hurt us, eh?"

"There is some logic in that," agreed the Professor.

Professor Zepplin was leading the way, dragging one mule after him at the end of a rope. Then came Ned with the second pack mule, followed by Tad and the other two boys. Butler wanted to follow behind the mules so as to keep watch of them, he not feeling any too great confidence in the worn-out old animals.

The Professor halted at a turning-out place, where the rocks had been worn out by the wash of a mountain stream sufficiently wide to enable two horses to meet and pass by a tight pinch.

"Young gentlemen, this is a wonderful country," he said.

"It's kind of hilly," admitted Stacy.

"In the Indian tongue, Alaska means 'the great country,'" added the Professor.

"Why, I didn't know you talked Indian," cried Ned.

"I always suspected the Professor was an Indian. Now I know it," chuckled Stacy.

"Young men, if you will listen I shall be glad to enlighten you as to some of the marvels of the country we are now in. If my recollection serves me right, the country has an area of about six hundred thousand square miles."

Chunky uttered a long-drawn whistle of amazement.

"Some territory that, eh, fellows?" he said, nodding.

"If my recollection serves me right, Alaska is bigger than all the Atlantic states combined from Maine to Louisiana."

"That's where they have the 'gators," said Chunky.

"And with half of Texas thrown in," continued the Professor. "It has a coast line of about twenty-six thousand miles, a greater sea frontage than all the shores of the United States combined."

"Why one would travel as far as if he were to go around the world in going over all the coast line, then, wouldn't he, Professor?" wondered Tad.

"Exactly. Furthermore, it extends so far towards Asia that it carries the dominion of our great country as far west of San Francisco as New York is east of it, making California really a central state."

"Oh, Professor. Will you please repeat that? I didn't get it," called the fat boy.

"You must listen if you wish to hear what I am saying. Your mind wanders."

"I hope it doesn't do much wandering here. I'll surely be a dead one if it does," retorted Stacy, peering down the sheer walls that dropped into the gloomy pass below him.

"To give you another illustration, were you to combine England, Ireland, Scotland, France and Italy, you still would lack considerable of having enough to make an Alaska. Then, added to this, are the great mountains, thousands of feet high, and one great river—not to speak of the smaller ones—that flows through more than two thousand miles of wonderful country. I have given you a bird's-eye-view of the country, a small part of which you have started to explore."

"Yes, a fellow needs a bird's-eye up here. He has to have or he's a goner," declared Chunky.

"And by the way, Professor," said Tad. "Your pony is yawning with his left hind leg."

"Haw, haw, haw! That's a good one," laughed the fat boy.

"What do you mean?" wondered the Professor.

"He is stretching himself. His left hind foot at this moment is suspended over several hundred feet of space. But don't startle him for goodness' sake," laughed Tad.

The Professor glanced back. Afterwards the boys declared he had gone pale at the sight of that foot held so carelessly over the yawning chasm, but the Professor denied the accusation. He clucked very gently to the pony. The

little animal lazily drew the foot in, and, after trying several places, at last found a spot that appeared to suit it and on which it placed the small foot. The boys drew a sigh of relief.

"My, but that was a narrow escape," derided Ned. "Just think of it, Professor."

"Gid ap," commanded Professor Zepplin. "Look sharp that none of you does worse."

Now and then reaching a spot where they could get an unobstructed view of the distance the boys were fairly thrilled by the sight of the jagged peaks, sparkling in the sunlight, many hidden in the clouds and too high to be seen. It was an awesome sight and at such times stilled the merry voices of the Pony Rider Boys as they gazed off over the array of wonderful heights.

"What are they?" asked Ned when he first caught sight of this vista of mountain peaks.

"The first one should be Mt. Lituya and the next Mt. Fairweather," Tad replied.

"That is correct, according to the map," spoke up the Professor. "The former is ten thousand feet high, the latter five thousand, five hundred."

A series of low wondering whistles were heard from the lips of the boys. It did not seem possible that the distance to the tops of those mountains could be so great.

"I should like to climb one of the highest," declared Butler.

"You can't," answered the Professor sharply.

"Why not, Professor?"

"Because I shall not allow it."

"And there's another reason," announced Stacy. "You can't because you can't. But if you did succeed in getting to the top think what sport you could have!"

"How so?" asked Butler.

"You could do a toboggan slide two miles long. I reckon it would land you somewhere over in Asia. Wouldn't that be funny?"

"I don't know about that," reflected Butler.

"You wouldn't know about it if you were to take the slide, either. But how it would surprise some of those Asiatics to see a Pony Rider Boy suddenly landing in their midst, coming from the nowhere," chuckled Stacy.

"I rather think it would surprise almost anyone to have a Pony Rider Boy land in his midst," answered Tad with a smiling nod.

"Is that some kind of joke?" demanded the fat boy.

"No, that's an axiom," spoke up Rector.

"An axiom?" reflected Chunky. "Oh, I know what that is. It is something that something else revolves around, isn't it? That's the

sort of thing the world is supposed to revolve about. I know, for I read it in my geography."

The boys groaned. The suspicion of a smile played about the corners of Professor Zepplin's mouth.

"You had better go back to school rather than be traveling with real men," advised Ned.

"Isn't that an axiom, Professor?" called Stacy indignantly.

"It is not."

"Then what is one?"

"You are a living example of one yourself," was the whimsical reply. Stacy pondered over the Professor's retort all the rest of that day. But when noon came and passed and no stop was made for a noonday meal, the fat boy began to grow restive.

"Don't we stop for something to eat?" he demanded.

"I should like to know where?" answered Tad.

"Isn't there a place wide enough for us, Tad?"

"There is not."

"But when are we going to find one?"

"You know as much about that as I do. Remember none of us ever has been over this trail. For aught I know we may have to sleep standing up to-night."

"Well, I reckon I'd just as soon fall off before dark as after. Anyhow, I don't propose to sleep on this trail as it looks to me now—"

"Hark!"

Tad's voice was sharp and incisive. He was holding up one hand to impose silence on his companions. Walter Perkins' face grew pale, the fat boy's eyes were large and frightened. Professor Zepplin halted his pony sharply and turning in his saddle glanced anxiously back toward his charges.

"What is it?" stammered Rector.

"I don't know," answered Tad Butler. "It's something awful, whatever it is."

"Have no fear, young men. I know what that sound is. There is no danger here where we are, for—"

The Professor did not complete his sentence. The distant rumbling that had at first attracted their attention suddenly merged into a deafening roar, and the trail quivered under their feet. The ponies snorted and threw up their heads, chafing at the bits.

"Hold fast to your horses!" shouted Tad. His voice was lost in the great roar that now overwhelmed them, sending terror to the hearts of every Pony Rider Boy on that narrow ledge of rock known as the Yakutat trail.

CHAPTER VI

CAUGHT IN A GIANT SLIDE

TAD knew the meaning of that rushing, roaring sound now. A few particles chipped from the rocks far above them had struck him sharply in the face. He knew that a landslide was sweeping down.

His first impulse was to urge his companions forward, but upon second thought he realized that this might be the very worst thing they could do. His quick ears had told him that the center of the slide was ahead of them. That was his judgment, but he knew how easily it was to be mistaken in a moment like this.

Glancing up the boy could see nothing but a great cloud of dust that filled the air. His companions seemed powerless to stir, and it was fortunate for them that such was the case, else they might have done that which would have sent them to a quick death.

Tad unslung his rope with the intention of casting it over a sharp rock that extended some six feet up above the level of the trail and on the mountainside. In an emergency it would

serve to anchor him. He motioned to the others to do the same, but either they did not understand or they were too frightened to act.

A sudden dust cloud obliterated the trail for fully five rods ahead of Professor Zepplin, then went shooting out into the chasm beyond, and a great mass of earth seemed to leap from the mountainside just above them. It hovered right over the center of the line of ponies for an agonizing second, then swept down on them.

The secondary slide, which this was, had but little width, perhaps a few feet. Furthermore, it had fallen only a short distance, so that it had not had time to gain great velocity. The mass smote the pack mule just ahead of Tad Butler. Tad saw the pack mule's hind feet go out from under him. For the smallest fraction of a moment the animal stood quivering, then his hind hoofs slipped over the edge of the trail.

The little animal was making desperate efforts to cling to the trail with its fore feet, at the same time trying to get its hind feet back on solid ground. That effort was fatal. Little by little the frightened beast slipped toward the great gulf. Evidently realizing the fate that was in store for it, the mule brayed shrilly.

The Pony Rider Boys sat gazing on the scene with fascinated eyes. Even Professor Zepplin

was at a loss for words, and at a greater loss for a remedy for the disaster that was upon them. Tad Butler's brain was working, however.

Suddenly Tad raised his rope above his head and gave it three sharp twirls. Then he let go. The big loop dropped over the head of the unfortunate pack mule.

"Jump on him and hold him down," shouted Tad. "Be careful that you don't go over."

The boys hesitated slightly. Perhaps they could not have accomplished anything, but Butler did not wait to see. He had slipped from his own pony with a sharp, commanding "Whoa" to the little animal, which served in a measure to reassure it.

The lad then sprang to the upright rock carrying the end of his rope with him. He did not make the mistake of making the end fast to his own body as he might have done in some circumstances. Instead he threw the rope over the rock, taking one quick turn about it. He had no more than taken that turn when the slack on the rope was suddenly taken up and the rope was drawn taut.

There was no need to look around to see what had happened. Butler knew well enough without looking. The pack mule had slipped over the edge and was hanging there with the boy's

lasso about its neck. The rope was tough rawhide, and Tad felt sure it would hold. Still, that would not save the mule, so he made fast and sprang to the other side of the trail. The mule, he found, was dying a terrible death.

The freckle-faced Tad comprehended the situation in a single glance. He knew now that it would not be possible to save the pack animal. Drawing his revolver he placed the muzzle close to the head of the unfortunate beast and pulled the trigger.

The report, in the walled-in pass, sounded like the discharge of a cannon.

"N-n-n-now you've done it," chattered Stacy Brown.

"Tad, Tad! What have you done?" cried the Professor.

"I have put the poor thing out of its agony, that's all," answered Butler. His face was pale and his eyes troubled.

"But you've killed him," protested Professor Zepplin.

"Didn't you see that he was choking to death, Professor? Don't you think it was better to end his sufferings with a bullet rather than let him slowly strangle?"

The Professor took off his sombrero, and, with an unsteady hand, wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Too bad, too bad!" he muttered. "Yes, yes. You were right, Tad. You did right. You thought more quickly and more clearly than I did. We had better cut the rope and let him go. There is nothing else to be done, I suppose."

"There is something else to be done, sir. There is something quite important to be done."

"What do you mean?"

"The pack. Surely we are not going to send that pack crashing to the bottom of the pass. We shall have to go all the way back for more supplies if we do that, provided we ever find a place where we can turn around."

"That is so. Still, lad, I am afraid it is hopeless. We never shall be able to get the pack."

"I think it can be done, but how I don't know yet. What time is it?"

"The afternoon is well along," answered the Professor.

"It'll be dark soon," spoke up Ned. "We simply must get out of this before night or we are lost."

"You forget about the length of the days up here at this time of the year," reminded Tad with a faint smile.

"That's so," agreed Rector.

"You know it doesn't get really dark until

about eleven o'clock to-night. So you see we have plenty of time in which to get that pack and reach a camping place before the night gets too dark for us to see what we are about."

Tad stepped to the edge of the trail and looked over the dead mule and the pack lashed to him. He saw that the pack already had slipped dangerously, and that a sudden jolt might send it hurtling into the chasm. The lad measured the distance to the pack, with his eyes, and also saw that he could not lean over far enough to accomplish anything. Then an idea occurred to him.

"Have you fellows got back your nerve so that you can help me?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," answered Chunky promptly. "Anything but jumping over. Don't ask me to do that, please, or I shall be under the necessity of returning a polite refusal."

"I shan't ask you," answered Tad shortly. "How about you, Ned?"

"I think I have got over my panic."

"Good. Pass over two strong ropes here. We'll have that pack in no time."

"See here, Tad. I am not going to permit you to take unnecessary risks. Before you go farther in this matter I want to know what you propose to do," insisted the Professor.

"I am going to secure one of these ropes

to me. The boys will lower me over the edge and I will fasten a second rope to the pack. I will tell you what to do after that."

"I can't permit it!" answered the Professor decisively.

"Listen to me, please. There can be no possible danger. It is perfectly simple. Before I go over I'll secure the rope to that rock, and in case the boys let go, which they'd better not, I can't fall; the rope will hold me."

After a moment's reflection Professor Zepplin concluded that the task would not be attended with a very great risk after all. Besides, it was all-important that they get the pack and its contents, if this could be done without endangering any lives.

"How about it, sir?" asked Tad. "Time is precious."

"You may try it, but I shall see to the fastening of the rope myself. Make your arrangements."

Tad lost no time in trying out his plan. He first secured one end of their strongest rope to the rock that already had played such an important part in their operations at that point. He next fashioned a non-slip loop about his body under the arms, then taking the second rope in his hands announced himself as ready.

"Take a turn about the rock so you will

have a leverage. Take up all the slack. That's it. Now I'm all ready."

The lad let himself over the edge of the precipice without hesitation. There really was no great danger, but it was not a pleasant position in which to be placed. He secured his rope to the pack lashings and tossed the free end up to his friends.

"How are you going to free the pack from the mule?" asked the Professor.

"Cut it."

"But we can't manage both you and the pack at the same time," protested the boys.

"You don't have to. Can't you folks think of two things at the same time?"

"I can when my thinking apparatus is working," returned Stacy. "The whole plant is idle at the present moment."

"Listen! Fasten the pack rope to that rock. Do you get that?"

"Yes."

"First take up all the slack or you may lose the pack after all. We don't want any great jolt when I cut loose the lashings. Draw it up well. Tighter! There, that's better. Now, have you got it so that it will hold?"

"It'll hold as long as the mountain holds together," answered Ned.

"Then watch your rope. Here goes."

Tad Freed the Pack.

Tad slit the cinch girth. He was obliged to make several efforts before he freed the pack, which then swung out and away from the dead mule, swaying back and forth for a moment or so, but safe. The boys uttered a cheer.

"Now shall we pull you up?" cried Ned.

"Now, don't be in a hurry. I'm not done yet. I want to save my lasso. You don't think I'm going to throw that away, do you? Pass me another rope, please."

This was done, after which Butler secured the third rope about the neck of the mule. He tossed the free end up as he had done with the other line.

"Make it fast. First see if you can't give me a little slack."

"Can't do it," called Walter.

"Yes you can. Try again. That's the idea. A little more. You're doing finely. You would make good sailors. Whoa! Make fast."

Grunting and perspiring, and with aching backs, the boys made fast the advantage they had gained. The weight of the dead mule was now resting on the new rope which Butler had fastened about its neck. Some time was occupied in getting his lasso loose, which had drawn very tight under the weight of the mule.

"That's what comes from having a good rope," said Tad.

"Well, are you coming up? You must like it down there," cried Rector.

"I'm almost ready. There, now see if you can get me up. Take up all your advantage and hold it until I can get my hands on the ledge and help you a little."

Hauling Tad Butler up, a dead weight, was not the easiest thing in the world. They drew him up an inch or so at a time, until at last he fastened his hands on the edge of the trail and curled himself up. The boys took up the slack and made fast at his direction.

"You needn't pull any more, but stand by the rope. If I slip it will give me a hard jolt."

"I should say it would," muttered Ned. "How are you going to get up the rest of the way if we don't haul you?"

"This way."

Tad crawled up the rope hand over hand until he was able to swing one foot over on the trail. The rest was easy, and a moment later he was standing on the trail, his face red, his hair and shirt wet with perspiration.

"Hooray!" bellowed Chunky.

"Wait until we get the pack up. Don't waste your breath," grinned Tad. "We are only half finished."

The lad surveyed the situation critically. Still he saw no other way than for them to haul

the pack up by main strength. He told his companions to get ready for real work. The pack was heavier than Tad.

"I—I can't do another thing," wailed Chunky.

"Why can't you?" demanded the Professor.

"My heart won't stand it."

"Oh, pooh!" scoffed Professor Zepplin.

"Did you ever have a thorough physical examination, Chunky?" questioned Ned.

"I don't know. Why?"

"If you had you would no doubt have found that you hadn't any heart at all."

"Now, Ned, that isn't fair," chided Tad laughingly. "You know Stacy has a heart. He has shown many times that he has. The only trouble with it is that it isn't as hard as it might be," added the freckle-faced boy with a twinkle.

The fat boy wasn't quite sure whether this was a compliment or otherwise. He decided to think about it and make up his mind later. But he most emphatically refused to pull a single pound on the rope. They compromised by making him look out for the stock.

Hauling the pack up was a slow and tedious process, for it was continually catching on points of rock and threatening to drop into the depths. Great patience was required to land

it safely on the trail, but land it they did after working and perspiring over it for nearly half an hour. The Professor proposed that they move on at once, after having divided the pack. Tad shook his head.

"Not yet," he said. "I've something else to do first."

CHAPTER VII

GOING TO BED BY DAYLIGHT

"SOMETHING else to do?" repeated the Professor. "I know of nothing more to be done except to get under way and try to find a safe portage."

"I've got to bury the mule, sir."

"Oh! Where?"

"I'll show you. Stand clear of the rope, fellows," ordered Butler.

Stepping to the edge of the trail he glanced down at the body of the mule, swaying with a scarcely perceptible movement. Looking back to see that the rope was clear, Tad drew his hunting knife and stooped over, his companions drawing as near to the edge as they dared.

Butler cut the rope that held the dead mule. The rope suddenly sprang back as the unfortunate pack mule's body shot down into the shadowy pass. The other boys instinctively drew back. Their nerve was not quite equal to standing on the brink to watch the sight. With Tad it was different. He seemed not to be at all affected by great heights or great

depths. He stood with the toes of his boots over the edge, gazing down until a faint sound from far below told him that the body had struck.

"That's all, fellows," he said, turning back to them. "I reckon we had better do as the Professor suggests, and get under way at once. I will confess that this bracing air is having some effect on my appetite."

"Don't speak of it," begged Stacy. "I am trying to forget that I have an appetite, but it's awful hard work."

"Too bad about the mule, isn't it?" asked Rector soberly.

Tad nodded.

"Yes, I should say it is," agreed Stacy. "There's eight dollars of my good money gone down into that hole."

"Never mind. He was wind-broken and undoubtedly would have played out before we got through the mountains. I am glad it wasn't the other one," answered Butler cheerfully. "How is the trail ahead, Professor?"

"I haven't looked."

Bidding them wait until he made an inspection, Tad walked ahead. He found the narrow trail filled with dirt and shale rock; there were many tons of it heaped up on the trail.

"Oh, fudge!" laughed the boy. "Fate is de-

termined to make us turn back. But we won't! We are going through, even if we have to build a tunnel. Get out the shovel, Ned."

This necessitated undoing the bundle that held all the tools of the outfit, and also entailed the unloading of the pack on the back of the remaining pack mule. Ned soon came trotting up with the shovel. He uttered a long-drawn whistle when he saw the blocked trail.

"We never shall be able to get through that," he groaned.

"Oh, yes we shall. I'll shovel until I am tired, then you take hold and make the dirt fly."

"I'll do that all right," returned Rector. "I am too keen for my dinner and supper to delay matters any more than I am obliged to. We ought to make Chunky take a hand."

"No, I wouldn't risk it. Before he had finished he would have lost the shovel overboard. It is the only one we have. Here goes!"

Tad did make the dirt fly. He was a sturdy young man, all muscle and grit. He shoveled for twenty minutes, working his way through the great heap of dirt. Then he straightened up, his face flushed and perspiring.

"Go to it, Ned!"

Ned did, with a will. An hour and a half was consumed in clearing the trail, and, when

they finished, both boys were wet with perspiration.

"I think we had better walk for the present," suggested Tad. "We shall stiffen up if we ride in our present overheated condition."

Ned nodded.

"I can't be much lamer than I am. I feel as if I had a broken hinge in my back," he declared.

They started on, moving with extreme care that they might not meet with another such disaster. The remaining pack mule was a much better animal than the one they had lost. He was possessed of better sense, too, and seemed to understand that great responsibilities rested on his shoulders.

As for the trail, it was the same rugged, narrow path that they had been following for hours.

"What if we should meet someone here?" wondered Walter apprehensively.

"Back up or jump over," answered Ned.

Stacy shivered.

"I don't like it at all," he muttered.

The Professor uttered a shout.

"What is it?" cried the boys all together.

"Land ho!" was the answer.

The boys craned their necks to see what the Professor had discovered, but he was just

rounding a bend beyond which they could not see. When they had made the turn the boys shouted, too. The trail, they saw, opened out into a broad pass. The ground there, though uneven, was fairly level, thickly wooded with slender Alaskan cedar, its yellow, lacy foliage drooping gracefully from the branches. Tall and straight, the cedars shot up into the air until it seemed as if their slender tops pierced the sky.

"How beautiful!" cried Tad.

"Wouldn't they make fish poles, though?" chuckled Ned.

"Yes, we wouldn't have to leave home when we went fishing," answered Stacy. "We could just sit on the back porch and drop a hook in the water at the back of the old pasture lot."

"How high do you think those trees are, Professor?" asked Tad.

"All of a hundred and fifty feet. A marvelous growth."

"I think I can appreciate the beauty of it more after I get something inside of me," spoke up the fat boy. "Do we get anything to eat or do we absorb landscape for our supper?"

"I reckon we had better get busy," agreed Tad laughingly.

They began unloading the packs at once. By

the time the boys came in with the wood the spot had assumed a really camp-like appearance. The pots were filled with water and Tad began building a structure that was to be their campfire when he was ready to touch it off.

"Did you find any birch bark, Ned?" he asked.

"Yes, there it is."

"Oh, thank you. The cedar will burn all right, but it is a good thing to have the birch. We shall have a supper worth while in a few minutes. Stacy, get busy and prepare the coffee."

For once the fat boy did not demur. He was too hungry, and was willing to do almost anything that would hurry the supper along. Not a mouthful had any of them eaten since breakfast.

The ponies were browsing contentedly, but the mule had lain down and gone to sleep. The day was still bright, though the air had grown cooler than when the sun was at its height. Still, a warm glow suffused the faces of the Pony Rider Boys because they had been exercising. They usually were busy, and not one of the lads, unless it were Stacy Brown, had a lazy streak in him. Stacy was constitutionally opposed to doing anything that looked like real work.

The cedar quickly blazed up into a crackling fire, consuming the foliage. Tad took some of the brands and made a small cooking fire that soon was a glowing bed of coals. Over this he broiled the bacon, toasted the bread, and cooked the coffee without the least apparent effort.

Stacy Brown sat regarding the operations. Ned said that Stacy reminded him of a dog watching the preparation of its dinner, but the fat boy took no notice of Ned's comparison.

At last the meal was ready and the boys gathered around the spread that was laid near the campfire, and began to eat with good appetites. Ned nearly choked on a biscuit, and Tad swallowed a drink of water the wrong way, while Walter accidentally kicked over the coffee pot, the contents spilling over the Professor's ankle to the great damage of the Professor's skin at that point.

"Here, here! Is this a football scrimmage or are you young gentlemen at your meal?" demanded the Professor. "I've seen nothing to indicate the latter."

"Oh, Professor," begged Tad laughingly. "Aren't you pretty hard on us?"

"You did perfectly right, Professor," approved Stacy. "Their manners are bad and I am glad you have called them to account.

Why, their example is so bad that I have been fearful all the time of getting into bad habits myself."

Ned gave him a warning look.

"Wait!" warned Rector.

"I can't. I'm too hungry."

"Perhaps we have been rather rude, Professor," admitted Tad. "I beg your pardon."

"Show your repentance by making a fresh pot of coffee, as I have most of the first lot in my stocking," reminded Professor Zepplin.

It seemed odd to be eating supper in broad daylight, whereas they ordinarily ate in the twilight or after dark. After supper, and when the remains were cleared away, the boys strolled about, talking. At ten o'clock the Professor called that it was time to turn in.

"But it isn't dark yet," protested Ned.

"The nights are short. Unless you turn in early you will not want to get up in the morning," reminded Professor Zepplin.

"He never does," averred Walter.

"I don't want to turn in at chicken hours," objected Stacy.

"Little boys should be in bed early," said Tad smilingly.

"That's what they made me do when I was a baby. They'd tuck me in my little crib and give me a bottle and sing me to sleep. What

time does it get daylight, Professor?" questioned the fat boy.

"As a matter of fact it hardly gets dark," answered the Professor. "We shall have only about three hours of real night, I think. That is about the way it has been since we have been in this latitude. You will find it more difficult to sleep with the morning light in your eyes than with this light, so go to bed."

"I am thinking the same. Good-night, all. Don't any of you boys dare snore to-night. Remember we are sleeping in rather close quarters," reminded Butler.

"One of you may come in with me," offered the Professor.

"No, thank you, we shall do very well as it is," replied Tad.

Stacy had the usual number of complaints to make. The cedar odor prevented his breathing properly, the sharp stickers on the cedar boughs poked through his pajamas and into his skin. He voiced all the complaints he could think of, after which he settled down to long, rhythmic snores that could be heard all around the place, inside and out. The purple twilight merged into blue shadows, then into black, impenetrable darkness that swallowed up the pass and the two little white tents of the Pony Rider Boys.

CHAPTER VIII

AN INTRUDER IN THE CAMP

"W'EN de screech-owl light on de gable en'
En holler, Whoo-oo! oh-oh!
Den you bettah keep yo' eyeball peel,
Kase dey bring bad luck t' yo',
Oh-oh! oh-oh!"

"Stop that noise!" shouted an angry voice from the tent occupied by the boys.

For a few moments silence reigned in the camp of the Pony Rider Boys. Then the voice of the singer from somewhere outside was raised again.

"W'en de ole black cat widdee yella eyes
Slink round like she atter ah mouse,
Den yo' bettah take keer yo'self en frien's,
Kase dey's sho'ly a witch en de house."

"Who is making that unearthly noise?" demanded the Professor in an irritated voice.

"That's Stacy singing," answered Tad politely.

"Singing?"

"Yes, sir."

"Nonsense! Does he think he can sing?"

"Yes, sir."

"Humph! I shall be obliged if some of you boys will remove that impression from his mind so that I may go back to sleep."

"Yes, sir."

"W'en de puddle duck 'e leave de pon'
En start to comb e fedder—"

A stone struck the rock on which Stacy Brown was sitting. Some small particles flew up and hit him in the neck.

"Hey, you fellows quit that!"

"Den yo' bettah take yo' umbrell,
Kase dey's gwine to be wet wedder."

"Yeow!"

The fat boy left the rock, jumping right up into the air, for the wild yell had seemed to come out of the rock itself. At that juncture three pajama-clad figures rose from behind the rock and threw themselves upon him.

"Let go of my neck!" howled Chunky, fighting desperately to free himself, not having caught a glance at his assailants, though he knew well enough who they were. Stacy had calculated on aggravating them to the danger point, then slipping away and hiding until

breakfast time. But he had gone a little too far with his so-called singing.

The boys picked the fat boy up and carried him, kicking and yelling, to a point just beyond the camp where a glacial stream trickled down, forming in a pool some three feet deep near the trail.

"I—I'll get even with you fellows for this. Can't you let me alone?" he cried.

Reaching the spring they held him by the feet and soused him into the icy water head first, thrusting the fat boy in until his head struck the hard bottom. He was howling lustily, howling and choking, when his head was out of water.

"You'll need your 'old ombrell' when we have done with you," cried Ned.

"You will wake us up at this hour with your unearthly screeching, will you?" demanded Tad.

"I reckon the Professor will give you a spanking for disturbing his morning slumbers," added Walter Perkins.

"That's enough, fellows. Remember the water is cold," warned Butler. "Let him go."

They took Tad literally. They did let the fat boy go. He landed on his head on a hard rock when they let go of him, and Stacy rolled over on his back yelling lustily.

"Look out! There comes the Professor, Stacy."

Walter shouted the warning just in time. Professor Zepplin, stern of face, gorgeous in a pair of new pajamas, a stick in one hand, came stalking toward the group. Stacy saw him coming. The fat boy bounded to his feet in a hurry. He was especially interested in the cedar limb with its sharp broken points, grasped so firmly in the right hand of the Professor.

"I reckon I'll see you all later," muttered Chunky as he made a bolt for his tent. Either some one tripped him or he tripped himself. At least, he measured his length on the ground just as the stick came in contact with his body. It was not a hard blow, but merely a tap of reminder. The Professor was now smiling broadly.

Stacy leaped to his feet and ran, howling at the top of his voice, and threatening dire revenge on the Professor. Professor Zepplin was plainly undismayed, for he pursued with strides that made the merry onlookers think of the seven-league boots.

"Say, can't we arbitrate, without an appeal to force?" bellowed back Stacy as he reached the tent.

"We cannot," boomed the Professor's deep

voice. "This is an instance in which the punitive expedition must go through."

Whack! Whack! That stick played a tattoo that made Stacy sore in more senses than one. Instead of burrowing deeper into the cedar boughs, he got up hastily. In his desperation he seized the Professor's feet, giving a mighty tug at them.

"Here, stop that!" protested Professor Zepplin, laughing.

He reached for the fat boy, but Chunky, with a new exertion of his strength, brought the tutor down to a sitting position.

"Retreat in good order, while you have a chance!" called Walter Perkins. Three grinning faces met the fugitive at the tent. But Stacy bowled Walter over, leaped the foot that Rector extended to trip him, and then dashed for the shelter of the tall cedars, where he hid.

There he shivered in his wet pajamas. It was three o'clock in the morning, but young Brown cared not for time. His stomach told him only that it was high breakfast time. The gnawing under his belt-line continued.

"I wish I hadn't been quite so fresh!" thought the boy, dismally. "It's all right to have fun, but there are times when a square meal is worth more."

However, the Professor, though he was really

enjoying the situation, looked anything but amiable.

"I'll try the crowd, anyway," thought Stacy, ruefully. "I've got to get near the kitchen kit soon. Hello, the camp!"

There was no response. Stacy emerged from his hiding place and began to sing the song he had learned from Rastus Rastus in Kentucky.

One end of the tent was suddenly raised.

"Do you want another ducking?" demanded the angry voice of Ned Rector.

"If you're man enough to give it to me," returned the fat boy.

Ned came tumbling out, but by the time he had straightened up, Stacy was nowhere in sight. The fat boy had stolen in among the trees whence he watched the progress of events. Ned returned to his tent in disgust. No further objection was heard from the Professor as to Chunky's vocal exercises.

"There's no use trying to sleep with that boy bawling away out there. What does he think he is, a bird?" demanded Tad.

"Sounds more like a hoot owl, the bird he was telling us about," averred Ned.

"I guess I'll get up. So long as he is abroad there will be no more rest in this camp for the rest of the night."

"Won't he catch cold? He must be all wet," said Walter solicitously.

"I hope to goodness he does," retorted Rector. "I hope he gets such a cold that he can't speak for a week. Then we'll have some peace."

"Oh, I wouldn't put it quite so strongly as that," laughed Tad. "However, I guess he will get the cold all right."

Tad dressed himself. After finishing, he thought to look at his watch and was disgusted to find it was only a few minutes after three o'clock. Ned declared that he was going to sleep again if Tad would keep the fat boy quiet. Butler promised to do his best and went out. He looked about for Stacy but failed to see him, so the freckle-faced boy sat down on the rock where Chunky had sat singing.

"Hello, Tad," piped a voice behind him, causing Butler to jump a little. Stacy had been hiding behind the rock, to which place he had crept from the cedar forest.

"Oh, it's you, is it?"

"I guess so. I'm cold and—and hungry."

"Go back to the tent. You should put on some dry clothes."

"You don't care whether I freeze or not. Go get them for me, please."

"I will not. You got yourself into this diffi-

culty, now get out of it as best you may," answered Butler. "There won't be any breakfast for three hours yet. Tighten your belt."

"I—I haven't any belt. I haven't my clothes on."

"That's too bad," retorted Tad unfeelingly.

"What'd you soak me for?"

"A cold bath in the morning is an excellent tonic. Hadn't you ever heard that?"

"If I had I'd know now that it isn't true. I didn't think you could be as mean as that, Tad."

"I didn't think you could be so mean as to wake us up at three o'clock in the morning with your screeching. Why did you do it?"

"I—I was exercising my voice."

"I should say so. But take my advice. Don't use it that way again, especially so early in the morning. You'll ruin it and then you won't be able to sing at all."

"That would be a catastrophe," mumbled Chunky.

"A blessing to the Pony Rider Boys community, you mean. Hello!"

"What is it?" cried Stacy.

Tad was staring fixedly at a rope suspended between two small cedars near the tents. It was on this that some of the provisions had been hung the previous evening.

"Where is that ham?" he demanded, apparently not having heard his companion's question.

"What ham?"

"The one I hung up there last night?"

"I—I don't know. I didn't eat it."

Tad got up and hastened to the "stores-line," as they called the rope that held their meats and other provisions. He discovered that several other articles besides the ham were missing. Even the pieces of twine with which the provisions had been fastened to the line were missing.

"Well, if this doesn't beat everything!" wondered Butler.

"It does," agreed Chunky, who had made bold to approach. "I hope the fellows won't blame me, but I reckon they will. They lay everything to me."

Tad did not reply. He was trying to make up his mind what had become of the missing provisions. He turned sharply to Stacy.

"See here, you aren't playing tricks on us, are you?"

Stacy indignantly protested that he was not.

"I knew you'd try to put it on me," he grumbled. "I'm pretty bad, I know, but I don't steal."

"Stop it! I haven't accused you of steal-

ing. Of course I know you wouldn't do that, but if you have taken the stuff and hidden it for a joke, say so now before I call the others. They might not take kindly to your joke after your early morning vocal exercises."

"I didn't. I don't know any more about it than you do."

Stacy's lips were blue with cold and he was chattering. Tad suddenly observed these signs of cold and felt sorry for the boy.

"When the others come out, you duck in and put on some dry clothes. You will have plenty of time. I don't think they will bother you. Oh, Ned! Professor!" called Tad.

Ned Rector, Professor Zepplin and Walter came hurrying out.

"Isn't there any rest at all in this camp?" protested Ned.

"That is what I was about to inquire," declared the Professor.

"What! *You* here?" demanded Rector, fixing a menacing eye on the fat boy. "Has he been cutting up again?"

"It's something else this time."

"What is it?" questioned Professor Zepplin sharply.

"Did any of you folks remove the ham and the other stuff from the line last night?" asked Butler.

"No," replied Ned.

"Of course not. You were the last one to attend to those things," said the Professor.

"I helped him tie them up," interjected Walter.

"And—and I watched him—them—do it," added Stacy.

"Yes, that's about all you ever do do," objected Ned.

"What's this you say?" questioned Professor Zepplin. "The ham missing?"

"Yes, sir. It is nowhere about," Tad informed him.

"Then we must have had a visit from a bear or some other animal."

"What would a bear want with a rope?" asked Butler.

"A rope?"

"I left our quarter-inch reserve rope coiled at the foot of that tree last night. It isn't there now."

"Stacy Brown, do you know anything about this?" demanded the Professor sternly.

"What'd I tell you, Tad? I knew you'd be accusing me for the whole business. I told Tad you would blame me."

"Go put on some dry garments," commanded the Professor.

Stacy lost no time in getting to the tent.

"What do you make of it, Tad?" asked Professor Zepplin.

"I can make only one thing out of it. There has been an intruder in the camp while we slept. That intruder must have been a man. Bears do not carry away ropes. Bears do not untie knots and take the strings away with them," replied Tad Butler in a convincing tone.

Stacy Brown poked his head through the tent opening.

"What we need in this camp is a watch dog," he shouted.

Ned Rector shied a tin can at him, whereat the fat boy ducked in out of sight.

CHAPTER IX

A MYSTERY UNSOLVED

"BUT surely whoever was here must have left some trace," protested Professor Zepplin.

"Perhaps you may be able to find it. I can't," answered Tad.

"We'll all look," cried Ned.

Tad nodded, and while they were scanning the ground he walked about the outskirts of the camp with his glances on the ground. There was not a footprint, not a thing to indicate that any person outside of themselves had been near the camp. Tad was looking in particular for the strings with which the stuff had been tied to the rope. Not finding these he was certain that some human being had been in the camp.

"We shall have to make the best of it and let it go at that," he said, returning to his companions. "Shall we go to sleep again?"

"Sleep!" shouted Ned.

Stacy popped his head out to see what the shout was about. He ducked back again upon encountering Rector's angry gaze.

"If it isn't Stacy Brown raising a row it's Tad Butler, and if it isn't Tad it's a midnight robber."

"Or else Ned Rector himself," added the Professor. "If you young gentlemen will excuse me I think I shall put on some clothes. We might as well have our breakfast and get an early start, since we are all awake."

"I was going to suggest that," replied Tad. "I'll go rub down the ponies while the rest of you get the breakfast."

"Shall we dress before or after?" questioned Walter.

"Before, of course," returned the Professor.

Breakfast was not a very merry meal that morning. Tad was chagrined to think a person could get into their camp and steal a ham without his having heard the intruder. Either he had slept more soundly than usual, or else their late visitor had been unusually stealthy.

"I'll tell you what I think," spoke up Rector after a period of silence.

"Out with it," answered the Professor.

"I'll wager that some of these prospectors have ducked in here and taken our stuff. There must be plenty of them in the mountains hereabouts."

Tad shook his head.

"I don't think so. I have an idea."

"What is your idea?" questioned Professor Zepplin.

"Are there Indians up here?" questioned Tad.

"Many of them."

"It was an Indian who did this job. No white man could get away with it so skilfully. If it was, as I suspect, we might as well give it up," concluded Butler.

"Oh, I kissed that ham good-by a long time ago," piped Stacy solemnly.

"I don't agree with any of you," said Ned. "I think the ham, unable to endure Chunky's singing, took wings and flew away. Either that or it was afraid he would kiss it again. He said he had kissed it good-by."

"You are wrong," declared Walter. "If Stacy had got that close to the ham he would have eaten it."

"You're right," agreed the Professor with an emphatic nod.

"I've got a bone to pick with you, too, Walt Perkins," warned Stacy.

"A ham-bone?" twinkled Tad.

"No, a drumstick."

"The probability is that we shall never know any more about the affair than we do now," decided the Professor. "Break camp as soon as

we have finished breakfast and we will get under way. Have you looked to see which way the trail leads from this point, Tad?"

"Yes, sir. That way," replied Tad, pointing.

"Northwest?"

"Yes, sir."

Camp was broken in short order and within an hour they were on their way. Though the country was very rough and rugged and the going awful, they found the trail narrow and perilous only in spots. Generally they found it perfectly safe. That night they camped in a pass through which flowed a rushing glacial stream. Tall cottonwoods lined the stream and giant arborvitæ was thick and almost impassable a short distance back from the stream. The Professor explained that this arborvitæ was ordinarily found about glaciers, and in cool, dim fiords.

Determined not to be robbed of their provisions again, Tad led a string through the loops made in tying the meats to the provision line. He carried one end of the string into his tent and when he turned in he tied the end to his wrist.

Long after midnight he felt a jolt at his wrist that brought him to his feet in an instant. Another jolt followed.

The boy slipped the twine from his wrist and hurried out. The night was not so dark but that he could make out objects distinctly. There was nothing of an alarming nature in sight. He examined the provisions. None had been tampered with.

Considerably mystified, Tad returned to his tent, after rearranging his burglar alarm, and lay down. He had just dozed off when there came another tug more violent than the others.

"Hang it! Something is at those provisions," he muttered.

Tad once more slipped out. This time he remained out for a long time. He sat down behind the tent where he waited and watched. Nothing of a disturbing nature occurred. He could not understand it.

"There must be ghosts around here," he muttered. "If there are, I reckon I'll catch them before the night is over."

He grew weary of waiting for the "ghosts," after a time, and returning to the tent went to bed. Three times after that was the boy dragged out by a violent tug at the rope, and three times did he return without having discovered the cause.

"I think I begin to smell a mouse," thought Tad Butler.

He lay down. Again came the tugs at the

string. But Tad apparently gave no heed to them. After a time he began snoring, but stopped suddenly, pinching himself to keep awake. A few moments later he got up quietly and went out. This time he ran the fingers of one hand along the provision line. The fingers stopped suddenly as they came in contact with a second string the size of the one he had used for a burglar alarm and evidently from the same ball of twine.

"I thought so," chuckled the boy. "More of Chunky Brown's tricks. I reckon I'll teach him a lesson and give him a surprise at the same time. Let's see. Yes, I have it now."

Tad found a quarter inch rope. He made a slip noose at one end, working the honda or knot back and forth until it slipped easily. In reality it was a lasso. He tucked the loop under the rear of the tent, then crawled cautiously in after it. Great caution was necessary in order not to disturb the other occupants of the tent, though the boys were sleeping soundly, Stacy snoring thunderously. The fat boy's feet protruded from under his blanket. Tad found them after a little careful groping. He wished to make certain that he had the right feet. Satisfying himself on this point he slipped the noose over the feet and wriggled out.

Tad then drew the rope carefully about a slender tree, taking care that there might be no strain on the other end about the fat boy's feet. Using the tree as a leverage Butler gave the rope a quick jerk. A slight commotion in the tent followed.

He now gave the rope a mighty tug. A wild yell from the interior of the tent told that his effort had been successful. The freckle-faced boy now began pulling with all his might, hand over hand. Stacy Brown's yells were loud and frightful. To his howls were added those of another voice. Stacy was sliding out from under the rear of the tent feet first, being dragged along on his back as Butler hauled in on the rope.

But Stacy was not alone. Instead of one boy there were two. One of Chunky's feet and one of Ned Rector's was fast in the loop. Tad had made a mistake and selected a foot from each of the two boys.

"Something's got me!" bellowed Chunky. "Help, help!"

"It's got me, too," yelled Rector. "It's got me by the foot."

"Oh, wow, wow! Help, help!"

The two boys were fighting and clawing each other in their excitement. Chunky fastened a hand in the hair of his companion fetching

away a handful. Ned retaliated by smiting Chunky on the nose. Then both grabbed hold of the tent wall as they slipped out from under it feet first. The tent swayed and threatened to collapse.

Walter Perkins was struggling about in the dark, shouting to know what had happened. Professor Zepplin roared out a similar inquiry and sprang from his bed of boughs. He fell out into the open in his haste, but the night was so dark that he was unable to make out a single object. He could hear the two boys yelling at the rear of their tent, struggling and fighting to free themselves from the grip on their ankles.

The hauling ceased suddenly. Ned reached down and freed his foot, the same movement freeing that of the fat boy.

At this juncture Tad Butler dashed out from the tent, to which he had run after having thrown the freed rope away.

"Here, here, what's going on here?" he shouted.

"Something got us. It was a snake," howled Chunky. "Oh, wow; oh, wow!"

"A snake! Nonsense!" exploded the Professor. "There are no snakes in Alaska."

"There's one here and he's the biggest one you ever saw. Why, he twisted right around

my leg and dragged me out. I think he bit me, too," wailed Chunky.

"Somebody make a light here," commanded the Professor.

"That's what I say," shouted Ned. "You pulled half the hair out of my head, Chunky. I'll be even with you for that."

"Did the Thing get you, too?" questioned Walter.

"Get me? I should say it did. I never had anything grip me like that."

Tad was busy starting the fire. The Professor, by this time, realized that the boys were in earnest; that something really had happened to disturb them, though he had not the least idea that it had been as bad as they said.

The fire began snapping briskly. Tad was bending over it in his pajamas, standing as far back as possible to avoid the sparks. Glancing at the others out of the corners of his eyes, he observed that Stacy's face was pale; Ned Rector's was flushed and angry, and Ned kept passing a hand over his head where the hair had come out. Tad could barely keep back the laughter.

"Now, show me!" demanded the Professor after the camp had been lighted up.

Stacy went into an elaborate explanation of what had occurred so far as he knew. He said

something had grabbed them by the ankles and dragged them out under the tent. He showed where they had been dragged. The backs of their pajamas were evidence enough of this fact, the dirt being fairly ground into the cloth.

The Professor fixed his keen eyes on the freckled face of Tad Butler. The Professor was plainly suspicious, but he did not voice his suspicion. Instead, he smiled to himself.

"I am going back to bed, young gentlemen, and I trust there will be no further disturbance in this camp to-night. If there is I shall be under the necessity of taking a hand in it myself."

"If Ned and Chunky will behave themselves, I don't believe there will be any further trouble, sir," said Tad.

Stacy fixed a glance of quick comprehension on Butler, and Tad saw in that one glance that the fat boy's suspicions were aroused, too. Stacy was sharper than Tad had given him credit for being.

CHAPTER X

IN THE HOME OF THE THLINKITS

STACY did not speak of his suspicions that night, but on the following morning he was up earlier than the others, looking here and there about the camp. He was unusually silent at breakfast time, but Ned Rector on the contrary had a great deal to say.

"Somebody was in this camp again last night. I don't know what he was trying to do, but whatever it was, he made a good start," said Ned.

"Perhaps it was the work of Indians," suggested Walter.

"I shouldn't be surprised," replied the Professor dryly.

"Perhaps," agreed Tad, "the Indian was after another ham and thought he had hold of one when he got Chunky."

"You keep on and I'll say something!" snorted the fat boy.

"I have been looking at that red mark on my ankle," continued Ned. "It was a rope that did the business. How do you suppose they

ever managed to tie it to our ankles without waking us up?"

"I thought you did wake up," answered Tad with twinkling eyes.

"We did afterwards, but I don't understand it at all. Didn't you hear anything, Tad?"

"If I remember rightly I heard two boys yelling like frightened babies."

Once again Chunky snorted, but held his peace. Matters were rapidly nearing a crisis. Chunky knew that he had played a mean trick on Tad by tying a string to the provision line and giving it a jerk to wake his companion up, thus making him believe someone was at the provisions. He suspected that the trick had been turned on him, but he wasn't quite sure. Stacy was covertly watching every expression on the face of Tad Butler, every word that was uttered, Tad in the meantime continuing to worry his fat companion. The latter stood it as long as possible. Then he arose rather hastily and strode around to the rear of the tent, returning a moment later with a rope in his hand.

Tad recognized it instantly.

"Here, if you want to know what got hold of us last night. Look at this!" exclaimed Chunky.

"What is it?" questioned Rector.

"It's a rope. Don't you know a rope when you see one? It is the same rope that dragged us from the tent by our ankles last night. Oh, this is a fine outfit!" jeered Chunky.

No one spoke for a few seconds.

"Ah!" breathed the Professor. "I begin to see a light."

"So did we," returned Stacy. "But it wasn't so very light that you could notice it particularly."

Ned started up, his face flushing violently.

"Do you mean to tell me that one of our outfit dragged you and me out by the heels last night?" he demanded.

"Yes!"

"Who did it?" cried Rector angrily. "I can thrash the fellow who did that. Who is he, I say?"

"Well, I may be wrong, but from the look of his face, I should say that Tad Butler knows something about the affair. Mind you, I'm not saying he did it, but I reckon he knows the man who did," observed Stacy.

"Tad Butler, did you do that?" demanded Ned.

"Stacy seems to think I did."

"Then I've nothing more to say."

"I—I thought you were going to whale the fellow who did it," reminded Stacy.

"I reckon I've changed my mind," muttered Ned. "I'll have a talk with Tad later, though."

"No time like the present," laughed Butler.

"Young gentlemen, enough of this. I am amazed at you, Tad," rebuked Professor Zepplin.

"Tell them the rest, Stacy," nodded Tad.

The fat boy hung his head.

"Maybe I was to blame, after all. I reckon Tad was after me, not Ned," admitted Stacy.

"What had you done?" questioned the Professor with a poor attempt at sternness.

"I—I tied a string to the provision line. You know Tad had a line tied to it with one end around his wrist so that he would know if an intruder began to interfere with the provisions?"

"Yes. Go on."

"Well, as I told you, I tied another string to the rope. After Tad got to sleep I pulled the rope. He went out to see what had done it. I guess he didn't find it, for he went out several times after that. Oh, I made him dance a merry dance," chuckled Stacy. "By and by I went to sleep. That was the last I knew until I found myself sliding out of the tent on my back."

Everyone shouted. Stacy's droll way of telling the story was too much for them.

"So that was the way of it, eh?" questioned Ned.

"So Stacy says," nodded Butler.

"And you didn't mean to drag me out?"

"No; the fellow who did the dragging must have gotten hold of the wrong foot," replied Butler.

"Then I forgive you. I would endure almost anything for the sake of seeing Chunky get the worst of it."

"Well, I like that!" shouted the fat boy. "I'm glad that you, too, got some of the worst of it. Why didn't you tie the rope around his neck while you were about it, Tad, and make a thorough job of it?"

Nevertheless, Stacy was set upon having his revenge on Tad, even though he was himself to blame for the trick that had been played on him. The sun shone over the camp of the Pony Rider Boys a few hours later, and the rough hike was again taken up. It was the middle of the fifth day after the roping experience when the boys first caught sight of Yakutat Bay. Huge cakes of floating ice were being thrown up into the air by the strong gale that swept in from the Pacific, the whitened ice in strong contrast with the black sands of the beach.

Towering above it all, nearly five miles in the air, stood Mt. St. Elias glistening in the mid-

day sun. Rushing streams roared down the sides of the mountain, thundering through deep gorges cut into the rocks through perhaps thousands of years of wear. It was a tremendous spectacle, exceeding in impressiveness anything the boys had ever looked upon.

At their feet lay the wreck of the rude cabins of the early Thlinkit Indians. There was no sign of any other village. The masts of a few small schooners were visible on the southern side of the bay. It was in this part of the waters that ships came to anchor. Here they were not exposed to the heavy swell from the Pacific, being sheltered by islands on the southern side.

An Indian wrapped in a gaudy blanket went striding stolidly past the Pony Rider party.

"Will you tell us where the town is?" called Tad.

Without looking at the questioner, the Indian pointed up the hill to the right.

"He means on top of the mountain," interpreted Stacy.

"No. There is a trail leading up through the trees," answered Tad. "But it can't be much of a settlement."

"There must be quite a town here," said the Professor. "I have read that in the year 1796 the Russians established a penal colony

here, having erected quite a plant. A city was laid out at the time, though I think I have heard that the penal buildings were burned down. But we shall find out more when we get to it."

The climb was a stiff one—almost straight up, it seemed to the boys. Three miles of this through a forest-bordered trail brought them to the village.

"This certainly is some town," laughed Tad.

They saw before them a general store, two or three shops that looked as if they were for the purpose of supplying miners' outfits, with a few scattering cottages here and there. To the left they could make out the smoke from the new Thlinkit village. Squaws from the latter were sitting about the village street weaving baskets. Such beautiful baskets none of that party ever had seen before. The boys could hardly resist the temptation to buy, but knowing that every pound and every inch of bulk in their packs counted, they contented themselves with admiring the handicraft of the squaws.

Ponies or horses were seldom seen in the Yakutat street, so those of the Pony Rider outfit attracted no little attention. A swarm of Indian children gathered about them, chattering half in English and half in their native language.

The keeper of the general store came out to greet the outfit, scenting some trade, and shook hands with the Professor warmly.

"Anybody'd think the Professor was his long-lost brother," chuckled Stacy.

A bevy of dark-eyed squaws surrounded the Professor. In several instances papooses were strapped to their backs, the youngsters looking as if they did not enjoy it any too well.

"Why do they tie them up in splints?" asked Stacy.

"To keep them from getting broken," answered Rector.

A squaw offered Stacy a pair of beaded moccasins that were gorgeous to his eyes.

"How much?"

"Fife dolee."

"Eh? I don't hear very well?"

"Four dolee."

"I'll give you a dollar and fifty cents."

"Two dolee. You take um?"

"You bet I'll take um. It's like finding moccasins to get them for that price."

"You will have to carry them yourself, you know," warned Tad.

"What do you think I'm going to do with those joy shoes?" demanded the fat boy.

"I supposed you intended to wear them when sitting by the fireside."

"Like the squaw, you've got another guess coming. I'm going to send those moccasins to my aunt in Chillicothe."

This was an unusual thing to do. Stacy usually thought of himself, but seldom of others. Tad called to the other boys to tell them the news. They examined the moccasins gravely.

At this juncture the Professor beckoned to the boys to come into the store, which they did after hastily staking down their stock.

"This gentleman says he thinks he can get us a guide," announced the Professor. "I tell him we must have a reliable one, for we know absolutely nothing about the country from here on."

"Black or white?" questioned Stacy.

"Oh, black, of course. There are no white guides up here. I think this one was out with a government surveying party once," said the store-keeper.

"He should do very well, then," nodded the Professor, well pleased.

"What's good enough for our Uncle Sam surely should be good enough for us," agreed Ned Rector. "What do you say, Chunky?"

"I decline to commit myself. I've been taken in on guides before this. Trot out your guide and, after I've tried him out, I'll tell you what I think of him. In buying guides I follow the

same tactics that Tad Butler does in purchasing horses."

"Oh, you do, eh?" jeered Ned.

"Always."

"Then be sure you examine this fellow's legs to make certain that they are sound. Feel his ankles that there is neither spavin nor ringbone, then open his mouth and look at his teeth to be sure that he isn't lying to you," advised Tad dryly.

"After which, one Stacy Brown will be reduced to the condition that he deserves," laughed Ned.

"What condition?" demanded the fat boy.

"Use your imagination."

"It isn't working to-day. I'm too hungry."

"Plenty of crackers and cheese and other things here," said Tad. "I am going to have some. Isn't that 'pop' up there, sir?" he asked the proprietor.

"Yes; have some?"

"What flavors have you?"

"Sarsaparilla and ginger ale."

"Give me both," interjected Stacy. "I'll have a pound of that cheese and about a peck of crackers. Got anything else?"

"Ginger snaps?"

"Hooray! Just like being in Chillicothe, isn't it?" Stacy filched a hard cracker and

slipped it into the mouth of a papoose on its mother's back.

The squaw did not observe the action, but one of her sister squaws muttered something, whereat the mother snatched the cracker from the mouth of her young hopeful, cast the cracker on the floor and put her moccasined foot on it. She launched into a volley in her own language, directed at Chunky.

"That's all right, madam. Roast me all you wish. I don't care how much you insult me so long as I don't understand a word you are saying."

"Do you wish the cheese done up?" asked the proprietor.

"Done up? Certainly not. I'll attend to the doing up myself." Chunky took a large bite, then banged the end of the pop bottle against the counter to open the bottle. The stuff was highly charged, and a good quantity of it struck Ned Rector in the eye. Stacy waved the bottle at arm's length before placing it to his mouth. The charge went over his shoulder and soaked the Professor's whiskers before the fat boy succeeded in steering the mouth of the bottle safely to his lips.

Professor Zepplin sputtered, Ned Rector threatened, but the fat boy ate and drank, regardless of the disturbance he had caused.

"If you open any more of that stuff be good enough to go outdoors to do so," advised the Professor.

"I wuz thinking ob doig it in here and shooting a papoose with some ginger ale," answered Stacy thickly.

"You will keep on till you have those squaws pulling your hair, Chunky," warned Butler.

The other boys were by this time eating cheese, crackers and ginger snaps. The proprietor had sent one of the Indian children to fetch the man he had recommended as a guide, and by the time the Pony Rider Boys had satisfied their appetites, the guide entered the store and stood waiting to be recognized.

The boys laughed when they saw him.

CHAPTER XI

THE GUIDE WHO MADE A HIT

THE guide might have been anywhere from twenty to forty years of age. The boys were unable to say, though they decided that he was quite young. He was considerably shorter in stature than the Indians they had seen, and Tad wondered if he were not an Eskimo. The guide's head was shaven except for a tuft of black coarse hair on the top, standing straight up, while a yellow bar of paint had been drawn perpendicularly on each cheek. He wore a shirt that had once been white, a pair of trousers, one leg of which extended some six inches below the knee, the other as far above the knee of the other leg. Over his shoulders drooped a blanket of gaudy color. The guide's feet were clad in the mucklucks worn both in summer and winter. Taking him all in all, the man was a smile-producing combination.

"Are you a guide?" asked the Professor.

"Me guide."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty year."

"I think that is about it," said the storekeeper. "These natives never know their age exactly."

"You look to me more like an Eskimo than an Indian," observed Professor Zepplin.

"Me Innuit—Siwash. You savvy me?"

Stacy scratched his head.

"Tell him to talk United States," suggested the fat boy.

"What is your name?" asked Tad.

"Anvik. Me smart man, savvy? Me educate Jesuit Mission. Me pilot Chilkoot, White Horse, Caribou; me savvy all over."

"Do you know how to cook?" questioned the Professor.

"Heap cook all time. Me savvy cook."

"You don't savvy any cooking for me," declared Stacy.

"You will think differently about it when you are hungry. Remember, you are full of cheese and crackers now," answered Rector.

"You have been out with the white men surveying, I am told," resumed the Professor.

Anvik nodded solemnly.

"Big snow—no trail—big mountains. White men get lost. Anvik find, Anvik know trail. Anvik big pilot. Me take um to Ikogimeut when Yukon ice get hard so man can go safe with

dog team. Big feast, big feed, tell heap big stories, big dance. Oh, heap big time. Innuit go, plenty Ingalik go. Me got pony, too. Buy um from Ingalik man."

"According to his story he seems to be the big noise up here," muttered Ned Rector.

"He has a pony. That is one point in his favor," said Tad.

"Wait till you see it before you call it a pony," advised Stacy.

"Me got gun, too. Me shoot. Bang!"

Stacy staggered back, clapping a hand to his forehead.

"I'm shot!" he cried dramatically.

"Stacy, do restrain yourself until we get out on the trail again," begged the Professor.

"Me make snare. Me catch big game in snare. Me heap big pilot. Me Ingalik."

"Have some cheese," urged Chunky, passing a chunk to the now squatting Indian.

Without the least change of expression the Indian thrust the chunk into his mouth and permitted it to lie there, bulging out the right cheek.

"Do you think this man will do, sir?" asked Professor Zepplin, turning to the store-keeper.

"He will have to if you want a guide. He is the only fellow here who has ever acted in that capacity, so far as I know."

"We would prefer to have a white man."

The proprietor shook his head.

"White men mostly are up in the gold country, Dawson, Nome, all over."

"Isn't there gold in this part, too?" questioned Tad.

"Yes, there's gold everywhere. You can go down and pan out gold in the black sands on the beach here. But what's the use? There is more money to be made in other ways in this country, unless you are lucky enough to strike it rich before you have spent a fortune locating the claim."

"Where you go?" demanded Anvik.

"North. Northwest from here. We want to get into the wildest of the country and we don't want to get lost."

"Me no lose. Mebby me find gold, uh!"

"We are not looking for gold," replied the Professor.

"We are always looking for gold," corrected Stacy. "If you know where there is gold you just lead me to it and I'll be your brother for life."

"Me show."

"I take back all I said about this gentleman," announced Chunky. "If the half that he says is true, he is worth several times the price he asks."

"How much does he ask?" inquired Rector.

"I don't know," replied the fat boy. "He's cheap at the price, anyway."

"When you mush?" demanded Anvik.

"We don't have mush. We have bacon and beans, and tin biscuit and coffee, and plenty of other things, but no mush," answered the Professor.

The store-keeper laughed heartily.

"He doesn't mean something to eat. Mush means march or move, a corruption of the French-Canadian 'marché.' He means when are you going to set out."

"Oh!" exclaimed the Professor.

"I thought you were an Indian, Professor?" said Tad laughingly. "I guess if we depend upon you for interpreter we shall get left."

"Of course I don't understand this jargon."

"Of course you don't," agreed Butler.

"I doubt if any other persons do outside of the locality itself. You see this jargon is purely local and—"

"That's what the doctor said about a pain I had once," interjected Stacy. "But it hurt just the same."

"Anvik, we would like to start this afternoon, if you are ready," announced the Professor.

The Indian shook his head.

"No mush to-day. Mush to-mollel."

"Why not to-day?"

"Innua him angry to-day."

"Who is Innua?" demanded the Professor, bristling. "We do not care who is angry. That has nothing to do with us."

"He means the mountain spirits," explained the store-keeper.

"Eh?" questioned Chunky. "Mountain spirits?"

"He means spirits in the air," explained Butler. "We are not afraid of spirits, Anvik."

"Anvik no like."

"How do you know Innua is abroad?" asked the Professor, now curious to know more of the native superstitions.

"See um."

"Where?"

"On big mountain," indicating Mt. St. Elias with a sweeping gesture.

"He won't go until to-morrow. If you want him you will have to wait," the store-keeper informed them.

"Then I suppose we shall have to wait," reflected Professor Zepplin. "It may be an excellent idea after all. We can pitch camp in the village and acquaint our guide with our methods of doing things. Anvik, do you know how to put up tents and make camp?"

"Me make Ighloo, fine Ighloo. Snow no get in, cold no get in, Innua no get in."

"How about rain?" put in Stacy.

"Rain no get in."

"That's all right, then. We don't care whether the snow gets in or not, but we don't want to have to swim out of our Ighloos in the middle of the night. One is liable to get wet, you know," reminded Brown.

The Professor arranged the wages with Anvik, calling upon the store-keeper to witness the bargain and put it in writing. The Professor then directed the boys to take the new guide out and begin his instruction in the ways of the Pony Rider Boys. The Professor remained to purchase necessary stores and supplies, consulting the proprietor as to what would be needed on the journey. The advice of the store-keeper was helpful in aiding the Professor to take only such equipment and supplies as would be absolutely necessary.

Anvik went to the Indian village to bring his pony, the boys in the meantime starting off to pick a camp site.

"One thing, boys, we mustn't play tricks on Anvik," reminded Tad. "I have an idea that he hasn't much of a sense of humor. He might lose his temper and run away and leave us after we were deep in the interior of the country."

"Do you know, I don't believe he is an Indian at all," asserted Ned Rector.

"Neither an Indian nor a white man," suggested Stacy wisely.

"I think he is an Esquimo," spoke up Walter.

"What's the odds? We don't care what his race is so long as he answers our purpose," declared Butler.

"He says he is an I-Knew-It, and I believe him," said Stacy Brown with emphasis.

"An Innuit, you mean," corrected Tad.

"That's it, an I-Knew-It, and that's what I did—"

"There he comes," cried Walter.

The Indian was leading a pony that looked as if it had not felt a brush or comb since its birth, but Tad's discerning eye noted that the little animal was hardy and well-conditioned, though of evident temper.

"Does he kick?" asked the boy, as Anvik tied his mount to a tree.

"Him kick like buck caribou. Him kick all time, both ways."

"We'll hopple him if he does," said Tad. "Be sure that you tie him so he doesn't kick our ponies, Anvik. We can't have anything of that sort. If he persists in kicking I'll see if I can't break him of it."

"You horse shaman?" asked Anvik.

"Yes, he's ashamed of his horse, that's it," chuckled Stacy.

Tad's face wore a puzzled look, which a few seconds later gave place to a smile of understanding.

"Oh! you mean, am I a horse doctor? Is that it?"

"Uh."

"That's what he is. Anvik has got you properly located this time. Ha, ha!" laughed Chunky.

"Come, boys, unpack. We must give our guide his first lesson. You sit down and watch us, Anvik, while we make camp."

The guide did so, grunting with approval or disapproval from time to time as the work pleased or displeased him. Under the now skillful hands of the Pony Rider Boys the camp rapidly assumed shape and form. All the tents were erected on this occasion in order that the guide might observe the whole process. The tents up, the boys settled them. There were plenty of trees about from which to get boughs for their beds, and wood was brought and a campfire built up. This especially interested the guide. He uttered grunts and nods of approval as he watched Tad build the fire in true woodsman-like manner.

"White man no make fire like Indian. You make fire like Indian."

"Thank you," smiled Butler.

"You make cook fire. How you make sleep fire?"

"A little fire close up to the tent," answered Butler. "I make it so as to get all the heat into the tent instead of sending the heat up into the air where it will do no good."

"Heap good. You good Indian."

"That's what he is, Anvil, he's an Indian," cried Stacy.

"I seem to be a good many things in this camp," laughed Tad. "Any further compliments you can pay me, Stacy?"

"No, but if you don't chase that buck over yonder behind the Professor's tent, I reckon you'll lose your rope," reminded the fat boy.

Tad sprang to his feet, leaping over the tent ropes to the rear. A native had reached under and was hauling out Butler's lasso. Tad grabbed the fellow by an arm and sent him spinning.

"You get out of here or I'll wallop you!" threatened the freckle-faced boy. "Don't you try that! It doesn't go in this outfit. Anvik, tell your friend that someone will get knocked in the head if he steals anything in this camp."

The guide uttered a volley of protest in

Innuit, which the assembled squaws, papooses and bucks received in stoical silence, and with impassive faces.

"They don't seem to be particularly impressed by your lecture," said Ned.

"Him no take. Anvik tell um stick um with knife if take."

"You will do nothing of the sort. We will do all the punishing. Don't let me see you using your knife to stick anyone. Now, I guess you had better show us around. Take your pony and come along," rebuked Rector.

"Where you want go?"

"Oh, anywhere. You lead the way. Will anything here be taken while we are away?" questioned Ned.

"No take. Anvik stick um if take."

"You're a savage, that's what you are," declared Chunky.

The boys got on their ponies, while Anvik, after letting his blanket slip to his waist, started away at a stride that the ponies had to trot to keep up with.

CHAPTER XII

IN THE HEART OF NATURE

THAT night the Indian slept rolled in his blanket with feet close to the campfire in true Indian style. He neither moved nor made a sound all night long so far as the boys knew, but just as the dawn was graying the skies between the great white glaciers, he was up and striding away on some pilgrimage of his own. He did not return until two hours later. When the boys awoke Anvik was sitting before the fire with both hands clasped about his bunched knees.

"Good morning," greeted Tad, who was the first to emerge from the tents.

"Huh!" answered the guide.

"Is the mountain spirit willing that we should make a start this morning?"

"Him gone," answered the Indian.

"Where?"

"Not know. Mebby Yukon, mebby Caribou," with a wave of his hand that encompassed all the territory to the north of them. "You mush bymeby?"

"Very soon. We will have breakfast now, then we will get under way."

Anvik nodded and grunted, then, straightening up, let fall his blanket and began preparing the things for breakfast. One by one the Pony Rider Boys appeared, stretching themselves and yawning. A wash in an icy spring close at hand awakened them instantly. Stacy was the last to emerge from his tent. He sniffed the air, then turned up his nose.

"Bacon!" he grumbled disgustedly.

"Don't you like it?" asked Tad.

"I was thinking last night that if I keep on eating bacon for many months more I'll be growing a pork rind in my stomach."

"You don't have to eat the bacon unless you want to, Chunky."

"Yes, I do. It's either that or starve, and Stacy Brown never will starve so long as there is anything to eat in the shop. Where's the bath room? I want to wash."

"Over yonder, and don't you wash where we get our breakfast water if you know what's good for you."

"All water looks alike to me," answered the fat boy, walking rather unsteadily toward the spring, rubbing his eyes.

Breakfast that morning was rather a hurried affair, for there was much to be done. The

supplies had been brought up from the store the night before so there was no need to wait for the place to open, and Anvik proved to be quite handy in striking camp, needing few instructions. He remembered well all that had been told him the previous day.

They got away early. As before, the guide disdained to ride his pony. He trotted along ahead, leading the little animal until some five miles beyond the village when he leaped to the pony's back, and with a shrill "Yip, yip!" sent it galloping ahead. This made the boys laugh. They did not laugh for long, however. A mile beyond this they swerved from the trail that led up parallel with the border between the United States and the Canadian possessions and struck straight into the wilds.

"Say, where's the trail?" demanded the perspiring Stacy when the going became so rough that the greater part of the time they were obliged to walk, leaving their ponies to get along as best they might.

"There is no trail. This is the trackless wilderness," replied Butler. "There is time to go back if you wish to."

"No, I don't want to go back."

Ere that day was ended Chunky almost wished he *had* gone back while he had the opportunity. Time and time again they were

obliged to haul their ponies up the steep sides of rocks by main force. Fortunately, the little animals, used to mountain climbing, were unaffected by dizzy heights or dangerous crossings, and picked their way almost daintily. The boys were perspiring and red of face, but happy. They thoroughly enjoyed this wild traveling. It went beyond anything they had ever experienced.

"I hope you are satisfied," panted the Professor when at noon they stopped on a little plateau from which gulches fell away on all sides, leaving them, as it were, on a magic island high in the air. "I sincerely hope it is wild enough for you young gentlemen."

"Not any too much so, Professor," answered Tad. "I could stand it a lot wilder."

"At the present rate you will have it that way."

They built a fire and cooked a light meal, after which all hands lay down for an hour, with the exception of Anvik, who sat bunched in his now familiar brooding position, gazing off into space. As he sat thus, his far-seeing eyes discovered something, but he did not change countenance. He simply sat in dreamy-eyed silence. Perhaps what he saw did not interest him. A column of white smoke had attracted his attention. Promptly on the expi-

ration of the hour that the boys had given themselves to sleep, Anvik stepped briskly to them, shaking each one by the shoulder.

"Mush!" he grunted with each shake.

"I wish you wouldn't say that," grumbled Stacy. "It makes me think I'm going to have breakfast."

"Heap big mush. Big snow, big mountain," grunted the Innuit, with a sweeping gesture towards the towering peaks of the St. Elias range which they were now entering.

"Have we got to go through that?" begged Walter anxiously.

"Um," replied the guide.

"But how shall we ever make it?"

"Mush."

"Yes, mush," jeered Chunky. "You just spread the mush over the mountain side and slide. Don't you understand, Walt? My, but you are thick."

All that afternoon they fought their way through the rugged mountains, making camp that night in a gloomy pass at the foot of Vancouver Mountain, a vast pile that towered nearly fourteen thousand feet high. It seemed to the Pony Rider Boys that they were a long way from civilization, and Tad admitted that he would soon be lost were he obliged to follow a trail up there.

The camp was made about six o'clock, still with broad daylight, but the boys considered that they had done enough for one day. The ponies were weary and Tad knew better than to press them too hard. After supper the freckle-faced boy shouldered his rifle.

Anvik gave him a glance of inquiry.

"Where are you going?" demanded the Professor.

"I'm going to 'mush' a little way up the pass to see if I can't get something worth while for our breakfast."

"You will get lost."

"No, that will not be possible. So long as I keep in the pass I shall be all right. Don't worry; I'll keep in the pass all right."

The boy plunged into the thick undergrowth, and no sooner had he done so than the giant mosquitoes and black gnats attacked him in force. Tad fought them until he grew tired of it, then he trudged on grimly, permitting them to do their worst. After a time he decided that he would get no game if he remained down in the pass, so, after carefully taking his bearings, Tad climbed the mountain until he was able to look over the tops of the trees. It was like a level green sea. He sat down in the sunlight, gazing out over the wonderful landscape.

"A world of silence," he murmured. "If Chunky were here he would say I was getting softening of the brain. Hello!" Tad froze himself. There was scarcely a perceptible flicker of the eyelids as his gaze became fixed on a point of rock just across the pass. There, poised with one foot in the air, stood an antelope. It was a young doe, as Tad surmised it to be. His position was not a favorable one for shooting because he was in plain sight, and the least move on his part no doubt would be discovered by the antelope.

"She must have scented me or else she has got a whiff from the camp. If I don't make any false moves she will be over in that camp within the next hour."

Tad raised his rifle slowly. Yet slow and cautious as he was, the antelope's head went up sharply. So did Butler's rifle. He took quick aim and pulled the trigger. The report of his shot went crashing from wall to wall, like a series of heavy shots.

The freckle-faced boy leaped to his feet, and to one side, with rifle ready for another shot in case he had missed. But he had not. The antelope had leaped into the air, turned a complete somersault, and went crashing down into the gulch out of sight.

"Hooray! Maybe it was a chance shot, but

He Raised His Rifle Slowly.

it was a dandy just the same. Now I wonder if I am going to be able to find her. I think I know how."

The boy took out his compass and got a bearing on the point where he had last seen the antelope. Noting the course he started down the mountain side, sliding and leaping in his haste. Crossing over the pass was more difficult, for a broad glacial stream was rushing through the center of it. Nothing daunted, Tad plunged in, but was swept off his feet almost instantly and carried several rods down before he was able to check himself by grabbing a rock.

The rifle had been held out of the water most of the way, though it got a pretty good wetting. The water was less swift from the rock on, and Tad essayed another crossing. He fell only once on the way over. This time he went in all over, rifle and all, but he got up grinning.

"It doesn't matter much now. I can't be any wetter, and I guess the gun isn't any the worse off, though I shall have to give it a pretty thorough cleaning and oiling when I get back to camp."

Having been thrown considerably off his course, Butler found some difficulty in picking it up again, but he found it at last, then guided by the compass made his way straight to where

the antelope lay amid a thick mass of undergrowth. He examined her and found that the bullet had entered just behind the left shoulder.

"I couldn't have done any better than that at fifty yards," chuckled the boy. "The next question is, how am I going to get her to camp? I reckon I shall have to tote her."

CHAPTER XIII

A PONY RIDER BOY'S PLUCK

"WHITE boy him make shoot," grunted Anvik.

"He has shot?" questioned Ned.

"Ugh."

"How do you know?"

"Hear um."

"You must have pretty good ears. I haven't heard anything," replied the fat boy. "How do you know it wasn't someone else?"

"Know um gun."

"It is queer we didn't hear him," said the Professor. "Do you think he got some game?"

The guide nodded.

"We shall see how good a fortune-teller you are, but the joke will be on you if it should prove not to have been Butler at all."

To this the guide made no reply. In the meantime, Tad Butler was having his troubles. The problem of how to get the antelope back to camp was not so easily solved. But Tad thought he knew a way. First he got a stick, which he sharpened at both ends. The stick,

about six feet long, he thrust through slits he had made in the hocks of the animal, somewhat similar to what he would have done had he been going to string the carcass up.

First strapping his rifle over his shoulder, the Pony Rider Boy raised the stick to his shoulders also, and, stooping, lifted the animal. It was a heavy burden and he staggered. The head of the antelope was dragging on the ground, which made Butler's labor still more trying.

The lad started away, keeping close to the stream in his search of a fording place, but he failed to find anything that looked easier than the portage he had used before, so he finally decided to go back to that. By the time he reached the former point he was obliged to drop his burden and sink down on the rocks to rest.

"Whew, but it's hot. And the mosquitoes and the gnats! If it isn't one pest in the wilds, it is sure to be another and a worse one," he concluded somewhat illogically, measuring the width of the stream with his eyes. "I'll try it."

The weight of his burden was a help rather than otherwise in crossing the glacial stream, for the weight kept the boy on his feet, except on one occasion when stepping on a flat, slip-

pery rock, they were whipped out from under him. Tad went in all over, with the antelope on top of him, and there he struggled and splashed, losing his foothold almost as fast as he gained it.

"Well, I am a muffer," gasped Tad, finally getting to his feet. "I'm worse than Chunky. I deserve a worse wetting, but I guess that's impossible."

The journey to the other side was made without further mishap. Then began a hard, grilling tramp down through the pass, the ends of the pole on which the animal was suspended continually catching on limbs and brush, frequently throwing Butler down, tearing his clothes and scratching his face and neck. His dogged determination carried him through, however, but he was in the end considerably the worse for wear. The first his companions saw of him was when Tad fell out into the open in plain sight of the camp, flat on his face, with the carcass on top of him. At first glance they thought it was a live animal they had seen.

"Get a gun, quick!" bellowed Stacy.

"Him white boy," answered the Indian. "Him git um."

"What, Tad?" Ned uttered a yell and started on a trot for his companion who, by this time, was getting up slowly and with evident

effort. Stacy and Walter followed. "What have you got there? We came near letting go at you."

"Yes, yes, we thought you were a bear," chuckled Stacy.

"It's a deer," cried Walter Perkins.

"Him antelope," nodded the Indian wisely. "White boy heap much big hunter."

"I'm afraid I am a better hunter than I am a toter. Stacy, I fell in."

"Ye-e-e-ow!" yelled the fat boy joyously.

"Here, let us take him in," offered Ned, reaching for one end of the carrying stick.

Butler shook his head.

"I said I was going to get him to camp alone and I shall."

"But—" protested Ned.

"Oh, let him carry the beast if he wants to. Tad likes to work," laughed the fat boy.

"Which is a heap sight more than may be said of some persons we know of," returned Ned.

Tad dragged the carcass into camp, casting it down a short distance from the tents.

"Him heap big little man," reiterated the Indian.

"How much does the animal weigh?" asked the Professor.

"A good ton, I should say," replied Tad,

sinking down by the fire. "I'm all tuckered out."

"You had better get on some dry clothes."

"These will dry in a few minutes by the fire," was the philosophical reply.

"Yes, that's right," bubbled Stacy. "When one side gets dry I'll pry you over with the stick on which you brought in the carcass. You can't say I don't do my share of the work in this outfit."

"I think I prefer to do my own rolling. I don't dare trust you," laughed Tad.

"That's it, you see. When I try to do anything you won't let me."

"Perhaps Anvik will show you how to skin and cut up the antelope."

"I don't want to know how to skin an antelope. We don't have that kind at home, so what's the use knowing about it? I know how to 'skin the cat,' and that's enough," Chunky declared.

Anvik deftly strung up the carcass and in half an hour had it neatly dressed, the boys watching the operation with interest.

"Heap much good meat," he nodded.

"Yes, heap," admitted Stacy solemnly. "What are you going to do with it all?"

"Eat um."

"All of it?"

"Some of um. Mebby wolf eat um rest. Mebby bear eat um."

"Mebby they don't. Mebby Stacy Brown will eat um if there is any left when my hungry friends get through with it to-morrow," jeered the fat boy. "I'll have mine rare, if you please."

"Huh!" grunted Anvik with the suspicion of a grin on his usually stolid countenance.

CHAPTER XIV

STACY BUMPS THE BUMPS

ONE by one the travelers were hauling the ponies up a steep mountain, over which their course lay, four days after Tad had brought in the antelope. They had eaten their fill of the meat, hiding the rest in case they should by any chance come that way again.

The going had been worse than before. It could not have been tougher for either man or beast. The mountain side up which they were struggling was rough and rugged. A short distance to the right of them the quartz rock was as smooth as polished marble save for a hummock here and there, some of the latter smooth, others rough. Neither Pony Rider Boy nor pony could have held his footing there for an instant.

After two hours' toil they got the last of the stock up, which in this case was the pack mule. Ned pulled on the rope while Tad and Anvik pushed. They were safe in doing so, for the mule could not kick without going down alto-

gether. Furthermore, it was as anxious as its helpers to get to the top and have the disagreeable job over with. The result was that all hands were pretty well fagged out by the time they got to a level space from which their way led around the base of the higher mountain.

"Now, Stacy, you haven't done much except to give us the benefit of your advice, so take the mule over yonder and tether him where he can browse," directed Butler. "Walter, did you tether the others?"

"I did."

"Come on, you lazy mule. I'm not going to tote you. You'll tote yourself if you want a feed," growled Stacy, taking hold of the lead rope and slouching off to the right. The bushes where they had placed the ponies were about ten rods to the northward of the point at which the party had landed. Stacy was apparently trying to see how near he could walk to the edge without himself or the mule slipping down that glassy side of granite-like rocks.

"Come along, you lazy cayuse," he yelled, giving the lead line a series of tugs. It was like pulling on a dead weight, the pack mule being too weary to hasten its lagging footsteps. Chunky turned around and taking firm grip on

the rope with both hands began to pull with all his might. The mule braced himself. He resented this sort of treatment.

The halter suddenly slipped over the animal's head, and the pack mule sat down heavily. So did the fat boy. Unfortunately for the mule it sat down with its haunches slightly over the edge of the slope, and down it went over the slippery surface.

"There goes the other mule!" yelled Walter Perkins.

"Fat boy him go, too," grunted Anvik.

They had failed to observe Stacy. What they were most interested in was the sight of their pack mule sliding down the slope backwards in a sitting posture. Alarmed as they were to see their stores disappearing, the ludicrousness of the sight interested them. The mule came in contact with one of the high places—a rocky bump, which bounced him up into the air and turned him completely around. Down to the next obstruction the animal traveled, principally on its nose.

Stacy Brown was only a few seconds behind the mule. The two had sat down facing each other. The mule being the heavier had gone first and, when once under way, his momentum carried him along with greater force and speed.

With a wild yell, the fat boy, sprawling and

struggling to catch hold of something to stop his progress, began the descent. Below him he could hear the rattle of tin cans, for the pack had broken open. It was raining canned goods down there, but Stacy was not particularly interested in this phase of the situation. He hit the bump over which the pack mule had leaped, was hurled up into the air, where he did a dizzy spin, then sat down with a force that for the instant knocked all the breath out of him, and once more he shot towards the bottom.

"They'll both be killed!" cried the Professor in great alarm.

Tad, comprehending the scene in a twinkling, started on a run. Choosing a point where there were no bumps in the way, he crept over and, sitting on his feet, supported on each side by his hands, began a downward shoot. But the freckle-faced boy did not long maintain that position. A few seconds after starting he was flat on his back, going down feet first at a speed that fairly took his breath away.

Ere he was half-way down, the mule had reached the end of its journey at the bottom of the slope. Then Stacy Brown came along, but not much more gracefully than the mule, and landed feet first on the animal. What the slide and the bumps had failed to do for the unfortunate beast, Stacy Brown did. He was a

human projectile and the mule, that had got to its fore feet, promptly lay down again under the impact. Chunky did a graceful dive over the body of his prostrate enemy, landing on his shoulders in a thicket.

"Stacy! Stacy!" yelled Tad as he reached the end of his own slide and got to his feet. Tad had not been in the least injured by the fall. "Stacy!"

"What do you want?"

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Then come and help me get the mule up."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm strung up."

Tad did not know what the trouble was, but he lost no time in getting to his companion. Butler gazed, then he burst out laughing. Chunky lay on his back on the ground, his eyes rolling. One foot was elevated as high as it could reach and still permit the boy's body to remain on the ground. The foot was caught in the crotch of a dwarfed tree, and was wedged in tightly, too.

"Gracious! How did you ever manage to get into that scrape?" questioned Tad between laughs. "Hey, Ned, is that you?" as a crashing in the bushes was heard near at hand.

"Yes. I'm coming. Is Stacy hurt?"

"No, but come here quick. Here's a sight for you!"

Ned threshed his way to them, then he, too, burst out into a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha!" mocked Chunky. "That's right. Never mind me. I'm only the fat boy, taken along to do stunts to make the rest of you laugh. I'm quite comfortable, thank you. I can stand on my head here for any old length of time. Have your laugh out, then shoot me! I don't want to die a lingering death."

"I'll lift him up. You get the foot out, Ned," directed Tad.

This was not so easily accomplished. Butler tried different ways of doing this, but each time the fat boy's yells made him stop short. Every attempt to lift Stacy gave his foot a wrench, bringing forth a howl.

"Let me have your hatchet," demanded Tad. Ned passed it over.

"What are you going to do? Going to chop my leg off?" demanded Stacy.

"Don't worry. It won't hurt but a moment."

"Pro-o-o-o-fessor!"

"Keep still, you ninny! We aren't going to hurt you," growled Ned.

Tad was already hacking at the tree, which

was small, but very tough. Every blow brought a yell from the fat boy. He couldn't have made much more racket had his companions in reality been amputating the leg itself.

At last Butler had chopped through. He grabbed the tree, but Stacy, jerking on his foot, pulled the tree right over on him, incidentally throwing Tad down. Then Chunky let out a fresh series of howls as the sharp sprouts smote him on the face and body. The foot, however, had come free with the falling of the tree, but the boy still lay there groaning, making no effort to help himself.

"Get up! You're all right," commanded Ned, jerking Stacy out by the collar. "See what you've accomplished now. You have done for our last mule. Had you not been along I don't believe the other one would have fallen off the trail."

"That's right. Save the donk, but never mind a Stacy Brown. He's a good joke, that's all," complained Stacy.

Tad had run to the pack mule which had got up, and was standing with nose close to the ground.

"He isn't hurt," cried Tad. "He is all right, Professor," he called. "Both mules are all right. Hooray!"

"Eh?" growled Stacy, flushing hotly.

Anvik, who had been making his way down by a more roundabout way, now made his appearance. He grunted upon discovering the disheveled Chunky, and shrugged his shoulders as he observed the display of tin cans strewn about.

"Much heap big fool!" ejaculated the Indian.

"Are you addressing your remarks to me or to the mule?" demanded Stacy calmly.

"Huh!" That was the only reply Stacy got, and Anvik began gathering up the stuff that had been lost from the battered pack. This was no small task, owing to the way the provisions had been scattered. Butler, in the meantime, had gone over the pack mule carefully to see if there were any serious injuries.

"He's a lucky mule," announced the lad. "There are no bones broken, but I'll warrant he aches all over from the shaking up he has had. I shall have to sew up that gash on his side when we get him up."

"Let's get started and boost him up, then," urged Rector.

"No, let the beggar rest. I haven't the heart to drag him up that mountain again until he recovers from the shock. We'll tether him and help Anvik get the provisions up first. Stacy, are you able to work?"

"What you want me to do?"

"Carry some of these stores up."

The fat boy shook his head.

"My weak heart won't stand it," he answered. Thrusting his hands in his pockets he strolled off.

The two boys looked at each other and Tad shook his head hopelessly. Ned picked up a stone and savagely shied it at a tomato can. It hit the can and split it wide open.

"If you must give vent to your emotions I wish you would throw stones at a tree, or at something that won't deplete our stores," suggested Butler. "Now see what you've done."

Stacy had promptly rescued the split tomato can and carefully holding it before him stepped gingerly over to a rock on which he sat down and began eating of the contents of the can.

"I don't want to see. Stacy riles me so that I want to thrash him. I'll do it some day, too!" threatened Ned.

Stacy paid no attention to Rector's threats, but having finally emptied the can, he threw it at Ned, then began climbing the mountain to rejoin the outfit.

It was all of two hours ere they finished their work of bringing the damaged supplies up the mountain side. Then came a tug of war in getting the mule up once more, the brute hanging back, the boys pulling and pushing. The Pro-

fessor had a new pack cover all cut and sewed by the time they had finished. The boys decided to camp where they were for an hour longer, then go on, making a late camp that afternoon, the days being so long that this could be done without night traveling, which was very perilous in that rugged section.

They finally took up their journey, making camp on a high plateau where Tad was destined to make an important discovery before they set out on the following day.

CHAPTER XV

THE STORY IN THE DEAD FIRE

IT was an hour past daylight on the following morning when Tad, who had got up early, shouldered his rifle and stalked out of camp, returned. The other boys were just out of their beds, heading for a spring to "wash their eyes open."

Tad did not show himself to them at once. There was no real reason for his caution, save that he was a woodsman and therefore always cautious as to the moves he made. Anvik caught sight of him instantly, and Tad beckoned. The guide did not appear to have observed the signal, but taking up his hatchet as if going out for wood, he strode from the camp also, and Butler seeing that the guide was coming, turned and walked briskly away from the camp.

The freckle-faced boy led for a short quarter of a mile straight over the plateau, a thickly wooded, rugged plain. Then he halted, waiting for the guide to come up. Tad pointed to a heap of ashes, the remains of a campfire.

"Huh!" grunted the Indian.

"Someone has been here before us," nodded Tad. "And not so very long ago, I should say. What do you make of it, Anvik?"

"You see um?"

Butler nodded.

"What you see?"

"A dead campfire."

"Huh. Heap much. What else you see?"

"I see a few things, Anvik. Of course I can't see as much as you do, but I should say this camp was not more than a day old. This fire was blazing yesterday. The ashes aren't the right color for a very old one."

"One sun," grunted the Indian.

"It looks to me as if there had been two men here. Am I right?"

"Heap good. Two men. Leave, big hurry. Him go that way. Stay here two hour. Wonder why big hurry?"

"Perhaps they wanted to get somewhere, some place for which they had set out in a hurry. They had two ponies and pretty heavy packs."

Anvik nodded.

"White boy much wise. Him see almost like Indian. My father him shaman. Him teach Anvik see many thing. White boy him see almost as much as Anvik."

"Where do you think they are going?"

"Not know."

"Perhaps they are miners prospecting for a claim."

Anvik shook his head.

"Too much big hurry. No prospect. Mebby go get claim. Mebby see um again."

"I hope we do. It would be pleasant to have some company in this wild place. They went in that direction when they broke camp. Is that the way we go?" asked Tad.

"We follow um trail."

"Then let's go back and get ready to move."

The pair strode back without another word, the Indian's admiration for the freckle-faced boy having increased greatly since Tad had beckoned him from the camp.

Shortly after noon as they were casting about for a favorable place in which to make their midday halt, Ned Rector, who was riding to the right of the others, uttered a shout.

"What is it?" cried Tad.

"There has been a campfire here."

"How did you find it?" wondered Tad.

"My pony walked through it and kicked up the ashes. Who do you suppose it could have been?"

"I am sure I don't know. See anything about the remains of the fire that tells you anything?"

"No. What is there to see, Tad?"

"It takes a woodsman to see things," declared Stacy Brown, getting from his saddle and gravely strolling to the heap of ashes, into which he thrust one hand.

"Well?" grinned Tad.

"Ashes warm. Haven't been away from here very long."

"Great!" cried the boys.

"You are a wonder," nodded Butler approvingly. "But you all missed the other one."

"The other what?" demanded Ned.

"The other campfire. There was another right near where we camped last night. In that case the ashes were cold. The travelers haven't made as much progress to-day as I should have thought they would, and it looks to me as though they thought they were moving rather too rapidly and had slowed down a little. What do you say, Anvik?"

"Huh!" grunted the Indian, which Tad interpreted as meaning that he was right.

The Professor was much interested in the discovery, and asked Tad and Anvik many questions about the earlier discovery. Still, there was not much to be learned. A stranger in this wild place was something to attract the attention and cause speculation and discussion, so during the rest hour they talked of little

else. Tad thought they would come up with the two strangers, but the guide shook his head.

"Him go north. Anvik go northwest. No see."

"We shall see by to-morrow. I have an idea that we are going to catch up with our friends before we get across the mountains," averred Tad confidently.

"Lunch is ready," announced the Professor.

"And speaking of food, I'm a little hungry myself," said Tad with a laugh. "I really am glad there is no one in our outfit with a delicate appetite. Walt, do you remember what a dainty picker you were when we first went out together?"

"Yes. I have changed since then, haven't I?"

"I should say you have. From a delicate little chap you've gotten to be a regular whopper."

"Yes, I reckon we've all grown some," agreed Chunky. "But if this kind of going continues we'll all shrink away to nothing."

"You will be able to lift a house after you have finished this journey," laughed Tad.

"I don't want to lift a house. I've got all I can do to lift myself."

Soon after, the party started on, to meet with a surprise ere they had gone far on their journey.

CHAPTER XVI

A SIGN FROM THE MOUNTAIN TOP

THE surprise did not come until just before night closed in, shortly after ten o'clock that night.

A hard, grilling day had been spent on the trail, with little relief from their labors, which were divided between hauling the ponies up dangerous slopes, down almost sheer walls, across glacial streams cold as ice, and last but not least the fighting of giant mosquitoes and black gnats.

"There is only one thing lacking to make this country the limit," declared Stacy after they had made camp and settled down to warm themselves while the guide was getting supper.

"And what might that be?" questioned the Professor.

"Snakes!"

"Thank goodness there aren't any such things here," exclaimed Rector. "It is bad enough as it is. Hark! What's that?"

"Him wolf," grunted the Indian.

"I should say there were several of 'him,'"

laughed Tad Butler. "They seemed to be stirred up about something. Are they timber wolves, Anvik?"

The guide nodded and grunted.

"Are you afraid of wolves?" demanded Rector.

"No 'fraid wolves. Mebby 'fraid Ingalik."

Tad drew from this that the Indian had something in mind that he had not spoken to them about. The freckle-faced boy eyed the Indian keenly, but Anvik's impassive face told him nothing. The guide had discovered something else. Tad was sure of that, but what that something was the boy had not the slightest idea.

Tad's gaze roved about over the landscape, traveling slowly from mountain to mountain, from peak to peak. Twice he went over the rugged landscape spread out before them with his searching glances. Suddenly his gaze halted and fixed on the peak of a low mountain off to the northwest of them. Butler shaded his eyes, and Anvik, observing the action, followed the direction of the boy's gaze.

The guide made no move, nor did he change expression, but Tad saw that Anvik saw. A tiny ring of smoke was rising slowly from the low mountain peak, swaying lazily as it rose in the quiet air. It was almost white. One

might have taken it for a cloud did he not know better, and only a mountaineer would have known better.

A moment and a second ring ascended in the wake of the first one, then after another interval a third ring rose.

"What are you looking at?" demanded the Professor sharply.

"Smoke," answered Tad.

"Where?"

"On that low peak. Where are the glasses?"

Ned hurriedly fetched the glasses. He took the first look, but saw no smoke. Tad reached for them. By this time another ring was rising. It, like the first one he had seen, was followed by two others.

"It's a signal!" announced Butler quietly. "Now what can it mean?"

"It means trouble for us," spoke up Stacy. "I can feel it in my bones."

"Who would desire to make trouble for us here?" demanded the Professor.

"I don't know," replied Tad. "I don't believe that smoke has anything to do with us. It must be an Indian signal."

"No Indian," grunted Anvik. "Him white man smoke."

"How do you know?" questioned the Professor sharply.

"Me know."

"Then perhaps you may be able to tell us whose smoke it is?"

"Him white man. Mebby same man, mebby not. White man all same. Him call other white man. Him say some along, by jink."

"Let's make a smoke and answer him," suggested Ned eagerly. "That would be a joke on him, whoever he is."

Tad said "no," and said it emphatically.

"No make smoke," agreed the Indian. "Smoke want white man off yonder"—pointing to the southwest.

"How do you know that?" asked Butler.

"Smoke him go that way. Want us, smoke him go this way."

"I never knew that before," reflected Tad. "You see, boys, they make these signal smokes by building a smudge, then holding a blanket over the smudge. By removing the blanket and replacing it they can make a definite number of smokes, long smokes or short smokes; in fact, they can almost make words, like the telegraph. It is a wonderful thing. I wouldn't be surprised if those signals could be made out twenty or thirty miles away, if one had eyes sharp enough to detect them."

"But what are they signaling for?" demanded Stacy.

"I don't know. Anvik says it is white men. I can't tell you anything about that. Smoke is just smoke to me. They are communicating with someone. We shan't see them, as they must be all of ten miles away."

"Fifteen," corrected the guide.

"That shows how poorly a novice judges distances in this country," nodded Butler. "They may see our fire to-night. If they are friendly we shall no doubt meet them. If they are not, we may never see a sign of them again. That is the way I reason it out."

Anvik grunted and nodded. The Indian understood a great deal more of what was being said than one would have supposed. In fact, to look at him one would not think he had even heard anything of what was being said about him. He was the silent, impassive-faced stoic of his race.

After darkness had set in the boys scanned the mountains for the light of a campfire, but there was no light to be seen. The Pony Rider Boys' campfire, however, was blazing up brightly, they having built up a large fire on purpose to attract the attention of the men who had made the smoke signals from the low mountain peak, low in comparison with the ten and fifteen thousand feet ranges about them. The boys turned in at midnight, a late hour for

them, and were sound asleep within two minutes thereafter. They were aroused an hour later by the most terrifying roar they had ever listened to.

"What's the matter?" cried Tad, springing from his tent, trying to pierce the darkness with his gaze.

"Is—is the world coming to an end?" yelled Ned.

"I guess the mountain is falling down," shouted Stacy.

"Guide, guide!" roared the Professor.

Anvik, drawing his blanket still more closely about him, stepped over and threw some fresh sticks on the fire. The roaring by this time had become a thunderous, crashing noise that fairly deafened them. One had to shout to make himself heard. Fine particles, like sharp stones, began raining down upon them, stinging the faces, causing the boys to shield their eyes with their arms. Stacy, in alarm, ran and hid in the tent; the others stood their ground, yet not knowing what second they might be caught in what seemed to them to be a great upheaval of nature.

"It's an earthquake," shouted Ned Rector.

Stacy heard the words in a brief lull. The fat boy burst from his tent yelling like a wild Indian.

"An earthquake! Oh, wow, wow, wow! We'll all be shot to pieces. Oh, help!"

Tad grabbed the boy by a shoulder, giving him a good shaking.

"Stop that noise!" he commanded. "Don't yell until you are hurt."

"I want to yell now. Maybe I can't yell after I'm hurt," returned Chunky.

"Guide! What is it?" roared the Professor, the perspiration standing out over his face, as Tad observed when the fire blazed up.

Anvik finished what he was doing before he answered. Then he spoke without looking up.

"Him mountain fall down."

"Is it an ice slide?" shouted Tad.

"Ugh!"

"An avalanche, do you mean?"

"Yes; an ice-avalanche," explained the Professor. "I have seen them in other parts of the world."

"Sun make him ice weak; ice fall down," explained Anvik.

"How about danger for us?" asked Walter.

For answer the Indian shrugged his shoulders and went on poking the fire. Then, of a sudden, there came a crash like a salvo of artillery. A crushing, grinding mass shot by them, snuffing out the fire as it passed.

Darkness and a terrifying silence followed.

CHAPTER XVII

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

AFTER the roar of the passing avalanche had ceased, and the awed silence became oppressive, Stacy Brown's voice was heard.

"Ow-wow!" he wailed.

"Are we all here, and safe?" called Tad. "Professor, Ned, Walter, Anvik!"

Each answered to his name.

"You didn't call for me," Chunky protested indignantly. "Don't I count in this outfit?"

"That's easy," answered Tad. "When you're not making a noise we know you're somewhere else. Let's see what the ice did to our camp."

"Heap one piece ice fall," grunted the guide. "Him sit on fire. Innua him mad, by jink!"

"Is Innua the scoundrel who has been throwing sections of mountains at us?" demanded Walter.

"He means the mountain spirit," explained Tad. "Don't you recall that Anvik wouldn't start out with us the first day because he said

the mountain spirit was in a blue funk, or something of the sort?"

"Oh, yes."

"Old Innua must have been in a rage tonight then, and we are lucky that we weren't in range of his projectiles," chuckled Tad.

Beyond destroying their fire, no damage had been done to the camp. However, after the excitement no one felt like sleep, so the boys sat about the fire discussing the ice avalanche for an hour or more. Then, at the Professor's urgent insistence, they turned in. Anvik long since had wound himself up in his blanket and gone to sleep.

Just as the dawn was graying, Tad got up, and shouldering his rifle slipped from the camp unobserved by anyone except the Indian. Anvik opened one eye, regarded the boy inquiringly, then closing the eye, dozed off. He was by this time too well used to Tad's morning excursions to ask any questions. He knew the boy was well able to take care of himself.

Tad had a two-fold purpose in view in going out this morning. He wanted to get some fresh meat for the outfit and he also was curious to know what the smoke of the previous evening had meant. While he did not expect to come up with any strangers, he thought that perhaps he might discover something.

Tad did. He had proceeded less than a mile from camp when he smelled smoke. At first he thought the odor must come from his own camp, then he saw that the slight breeze was from the opposite direction.

"That means that someone isn't far ahead of me. It means I am going to find out who it is if I can."

After floundering about for fully half an hour, with the odor of smoke becoming more pungent all the time, the boy was on the point of confessing that he was beaten, when all at once he caught the sound of a human voice. The voice was not loud enough to enable him to distinguish the words, but he was quite sure it was the voice of a white man and not far away at that.

"They have masked their camp. That's why I haven't been able to find them," muttered the boy, starting ahead again. After creeping forward cautiously for some time, a wave of suffocating smoke from burning wood smote him full in the face.

Tad uttered a loud sneeze. Two men suddenly appeared in the haze of smoke, and the boy heard the sound of hands slapping pistol holsters. He was able to make the men out faintly, but not with sufficient clearness to see who or what they were.

"Hold on, boys—don't shoot!" warned Butler, as he stepped around the smudge to enable him to get a better view of the men whom he had come upon so unexpectedly, to them.

Before him stood Curtis Darwood and Dill Bruce, the latter known among his companions as the Pickle. Each man held his revolver ready for quick action.

"Why, how do you do?" smiled Tad. "I hadn't the least idea I should find anyone I knew."

"Well, suffering blue jays, if it isn't old Spotted Face!" exclaimed Bruce. "Howdy?"

"Very good. How are you?" Tad stepped forward. Bruce shook hands cordially with the boy. Tad turned to Darwood, who had not said a word. The latter's face darkened, and he appeared not to have observed the hand that Tad extended toward him.

"Aren't you going to shake hands with me, Mr. Darwood?" asked the lad.

"I reckon you ought to know better than to ask it," returned the gold digger. "I reckon, further, that if you know what's good for you you'll be mushing out of this as fast as your legs will carry you, unless you are looking for trouble. Git!"

CHAPTER XVIII

AN UNFRIENDLY RECEPTION

TAD gazed at the gold digger in amazement.

"I—I don't understand, Mr. Darwood."

"Don't you understand plain English? I said 'git.' We don't want anything to do with you, and if we find you fooling about our outfit after this we'll try something else to keep you away," warned the prospector.

"I don't know why you appear to have taken such a dislike to me. I am sure I have done nothing to merit it. However, I am equally sure that I don't want anything to do with you. If you change your mind and can act like a man, instead of a kid, I shall be glad to see you. But don't get funny. We may be boys but we are quite able to take care of ourselves," answered Tad, turning away.

"Stop!"

Darwood's voice was stern. Tad halted and turned towards the two men.

"You reckon you're mighty smart, I know,

but you must think I'm a natural-born fool not to know that you have been following us all the way up here."

"What?"

"Oh, you needn't play the innocent dodge. You know what I mean."

"You—you think we have been following you?" questioned the boy, scarcely able to believe that the prospector was in earnest.

"I don't think. I know. You're like all the rest of them. We have had this thing happen to us before. There are plenty more like you, and they've followed us, hoping they will be the first to discover the bear totem and the claim that we are in search of."

"Taku Pass?" asked Butler with a half smile on his face.

Darwood's face flushed angrily.

"What did I tell you, Bruce?" he snapped. "Are you going?" he demanded, turning towards Tad.

"Yes. I don't care to stay where I'm not wanted. But before going I am going to tell you something. We are not prospecting, nor following prospectors. We are taking our usual summer vacation on horseback. All I know about your affairs is what Captain Petersen of the 'Corsair' told me, and what I overheard from Sandy Ketcham. If you will recall

I told you about that. The Captain gave me your history as far as he knew it, and I was much interested. How could I help being? I love adventure and so do my companions. We wanted to know more about it, but did not think it was any of our business until I overheard Ketcham plotting against you. We hadn't the least idea we ever should see you again. My finding you this morning was a pure accident."

"How'd you happen to do it?" interjected Dill Bruce.

"I saw your smoke signs last night."

"What!"

Darwood snapped the word out like the crack of a whip.

"I saw your smoke signs. At least I suppose they were yours. This morning I started out, as I frequently do, in search of game. I smelled your smoke and out of curiosity hunted you up to see who our neighbors were. That's all there is to it. If you can get anything out of that you are welcome to it. I wish you luck in finding Taku Pass. If I should stumble on it, I'll look you up and let you know. We aren't looking for gold mines especially. 'Bye."

"Well, what d'ye think of that?" grinned the Pickle after Tad had left them.

"I think somebody will get hurt if they don't leave us alone," growled Darwood, caressing

the butt of his revolver. "I'm getting tired of this kind of nagging."

"That outfit isn't nagging you," answered Bruce.

"How do you know?"

"They are nothing but boys. At least one of them is the right sort. Spotted Face did us a favor. He isn't a crook."

"I haven't said he was. But you don't know who is in their outfit now. Besides, there isn't one chance in a thousand that they'd be so close on our trail unless they had followed us on purpose. No, this business must be stopped. We may be on the right track, and if we are we must protect ourselves, and we'll do it, even though we have to kill a few curious hounds who are following the trail. The boy business may be merely a mask for the operations of some other persons."

"Why don't you find out, then?"

Darwood bent a keen gaze on his companion.

"What do you mean?"

"Hunt up their camp and see what is going on?"

"I'll do it," answered the gold digger with emphasis. "What's more, I'll do it now."

"That's the talk! If you hurry, you may be able to find the boy and follow him in. Shall I go along?"

"No. You stay here and look after things. I may be away for some time. I don't know where they are, but I'll find them if it takes all day. If our two comrades come in, you hold them here. Needn't tell them where I am."

Darwood shouldered his rifle and strode from his camp without another word. Bruce replenished the fire in order to make a smudge that could be smelled for some distance away, which was for the purpose of directing their companions to them, and also had served to call Tad Butler into their camp in advance of the other two gold diggers.

Tad was out of sight by the time Curtis Darwood got out, but Darwood was able to follow the boy's trail, though it was not an easy one. Tad had made no effort to mask his trail, but his natural instincts taught him to leave as few indications of his progress as possible. Darwood saw this. Instead of lessening his suspicions this fact served to increase them. The gold digger was using his nose more than his eyes, sniffing the air for the smoke from the camp of the Pony Rider Boys' outfit. He caught the scent after half an hour or so of trudging over the hard trail. From this time on it was easy so far as finding his way was concerned. Butler, knowing the way, had made much better time back to his own camp.

Breakfast was ready by the time he reached there. Tad did not mention his experience, not having decided what he would do in this matter.

"You find big smoke?" questioned the Indian as Tad stood over him by the fire.

"Yes," answered the lad carelessly. Anvik shrewdly deduced that Butler had made some sort of discovery, but he asked no further questions. Perhaps the guide also had discovered that they had near neighbors. If so he kept that fact to himself.

The boys sat down to breakfast. They discussed the day's ride and talked of their further journeyings, though Tad had little to say that morning. He was thinking deeply on what had just occurred.

The breakfast was about half finished when the lad flashed a quick, keen glance in the direction from which he had entered the camp. The others did not observe his sharp glance of inquiry. Tad had seen something. A movement of the foliage had attracted his observant eyes. He glanced at Anvik, who was sitting with his back to the party, gazing off over the mountains to the rear of them and through which they had worked their way to the present camping place.

Tad casually reached over for his rifle that was standing against a rock.

"What's up?" demanded Ned sharply.

"I want to examine my gun," replied the boy.

"Funny time to examine it when eating your breakfast," spoke up Walter.

"I prefer to eat," said Stacy.

"We know that," chuckled Ned. "No need for you to tell us."

The Professor was eyeing Tad inquiringly, observing that the boy's face was slightly flushed.

"What is it, Tad?" he asked.

"Nothing, except that I am going to take a pot shot at an intruder," replied the boy calmly, suddenly leveling his rifle on the bushes where he had observed the movement a few moments before.

He pulled the trigger. A deafening crash brought the boys to their feet, yelling. The shot was followed by a shout from the bushes.

"Stop that shooting, you fool!" roared a voice. Tad put down his gun, grinning broadly, the others dancing about excitedly.

"Come out of that or I'll give you something to yell at," commanded the Pony Rider Boy.

Curtis Darwood, his face stern and determined, stepped out into the open and walked straight towards the amazed group now stand-

Curtis Darwood Stepped Out.

ing near the campfire. The Indian guide was the only person who had not gotten up when Tad Butler sent a bullet into the thicket fully six feet above the head of the gold digger who was spying on the camp.

Darwood was more angry at having been discovered than being shot at. He had heard the bullet rip through the foliage above his head, and knew that the shot had been intended to stir him up rather than to reach him. That the boy whom he had driven from his own camp should have thus turned the tables on him angered him almost beyond his control. Darwood was so angry that he failed to see any humor in the situation.

"It is Mr. Darwood, isn't it?" cried the Professor with face aglow, striding forward with outstretched hand. As in Butler's case, Darwood professed not to see the proffered hand. He looked the Professor squarely in the face.

"Won't you sit down and have a snack with us?" asked Professor Zepplin. "We were eating when Tad fired that shot. That was very careless of you, young man. You might have killed someone."

"I reckon he knew whom he was shooting at," answered the gold digger. "You see, this isn't the first time that young fellow and myself have met."

"Of course not. We all met on the 'Corsair,'" spoke up Rector.

"He and I have met since then," answered Darwood. "I reckon you know all about it. He came spying on our camp this morning just after daylight, and—"

"You know that isn't true," interjected Tad. "Why don't you tell it straight if you are bound to tell it?"

The miner let one hand fall to his holster.

"Up in this country they don't call men liars," answered Darwood, looking Butler coldly in the eyes.

"Then men shouldn't place themselves in a position to be called liars," retorted Tad boldly. "You had better take your hand from your revolver. If you will take the time to glance at the rock to your right you may possibly see something to interest you."

The miner cast a quick glance of inquiry in the direction indicated, and found himself looking into the muzzle of a rifle, laid over the top of the rock. Behind the rifle was Chunky, one eye peering over the sights.

Tad laughed.

"Stacy!" thundered the Professor. "What does this mean?"

"Nothing, Professor," answered Tad. "Chunky got a little excited, that is all. You

may put the gun down, Stacy. Mr. Darwood doesn't understand; that's all. Sit down and have a snack with us, as the Professor has asked you to do," urged Butler.

"I don't want to eat with you. You know it. Don't you go to getting me riled or I won't answer for the consequences."

"Neither will I," answered Tad smilingly. "We are easy to get along with unless someone treads on our toes; then it's a different story. Sit down and we will talk this matter over."

Tad threw himself down beside the fire. Stacy still sat behind the rock, gazing suspiciously at their early morning visitor.

"I demand to know the meaning of this scene," said the Professor sternly.

"Let Mr. Darwood tell you," replied Butler.

The gold digger made no answer. Tad turned to the Professor.

"I will tell you what there is to it, sir. Mr. Darwood thinks we are like some others he has met. He thinks we are trying to steal his gold mine," declared Tad in an impressive voice.

Professor Zepplin flushed deeply.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PROFESSOR IN A RAGE

"WHAT!" fairly exploded Professor Zepplin.

"Mr. Darwood accuses us of having followed him to find out where this wonderful gold deposit is located. He thinks we want to steal it away from him."

"Preposterous!"

"Show me some gold," urged Stacy, edging near. "I am looking for gold. I don't make any bones about saying so, either."

"Be silent," commanded the Professor.

"I smelled smoke when I was out this morning," continued Butler. "I followed the scent until I stumbled into Mr. Darwood's camp. It was his signal smokes that we saw yesterday. Mr. Darwood did not give me a very cordial welcome; he ordered me out of his camp. Not only that, but he threatened me in case we persisted in following him. I think he would have used his pistol on me if I had not gone away when I did."

"Is this true, Darwood?" questioned the

Professor, who was restraining himself with an effort.

"I reckon it's right, so far as it goes. I know what you fellows are up to. You may think you can fool me, but I've been in these parts too long to be an easy mark. It's nobody's business whether we are in search of gold or whether we are up here for our health. Whatever our business is, we don't propose to have a lot of folks sticking their noses into it."

"What do you propose that we shall do?" asked Professor Zepplin.

"I don't care what you do," roared the gold digger.

"Then there is nothing more to be said."

"Oh, yes there is. There's a lot to be said. I am not going to say it all right here, but I reckon I'll say it in a different way later on. You are following us. Don't deny it. I know you are. You pumped the Captain and everybody else on the boat about us. Then, when you thought you had got all the information you wanted, you followed us."

"It's not true. You know it's a lie!" shouted the Professor.

"Be careful how you nag me on," warned the miner.

"You know you think nothing of the kind.

What is it that you reckon to say at some other time?"

"This," answered Darwood, tapping his holster significantly.

Tad laughed softly to himself. This angered the gold digger more than ever.

"You folks get out of these hills! Go anywhere you want to, but get out and get out quick. Some more of my men are coming along to-day. If you are here to-night it will be the worse for you," threatened the miner.

"Which direction would you suggest our taking?" asked Tad in a soothing voice.

"Go back the way you came. I don't care where you go."

"You are not consistent," laughed the freckle-faced boy. "You tell us you don't care where we go, then you order us to proceed in a definite direction. You are going too far, Mr. Darwood. When you have had a chance to cool down I think you will look at this matter in a different light. If you will use your head a little you will see it is not possible that we could have had any previous knowledge of your plans or of your gold mine. You had better make friends with us. We might be of some use to you. Professor Zepplin is a scientist. He could give you valuable help. Shall we call quits and shake hands? Come on."

The words that he would utter seemed to stick in the gold digger's throat. He clutched twice at his holster, but the evident desire on his part to use his pistol appeared to have no effect at all on the Pony Rider outfit. Darwood knew very well that drawing his weapon would practically be the end of himself, and this did not tend to make his situation any better.

"I'll not shake hands with you. I am going back to my camp. If you thieves are here by to-night I promise you there will be something doing. I—"

Professor Zepplin strode forward, his whiskers bristling, his fists clenched. The boys never had seen their guardian so angry.

"That for your threats!" he roared, shaking a fist under the nose of Curtis Darwood. "Your threats don't frighten us. Your pistol doesn't frighten us. We're not that kind."

The miner started to reply.

"Don't you open your mouth or I shall forget myself and slap your face. Thieves!" Professor Zepplin struggled to master his emotions. "Thieves! This is too much. You tell us that if we are here to-night you will make matters lively for us. If it will accommodate you any we will remain right here. But we should be on our way. We are going to follow

a straight course as near as possible to the northwest. We shall, with reasonable luck, be about twenty miles from here by eleven o'clock to-night. If that is the direction you are going you will have no difficulty in finding us. But let me warn you, sir, we shall put up with no trifling. We have as good a right to be here as have you, and I am not sure but that we have a better right."

"We'll see about that," retorted Darwood angrily.

"You let us alone! Do you hear? You let us alone! If you are looking for trouble you may have all you want and then some more besides. We are peaceable travelers, but we know from long experience how to take care of ourselves. Have you anything more to say to me?" demanded the Professor.

"I reckon not. I've said my say."

"Then get out before I forget myself and hit you on the nose!" roared Professor Zepplin. "Don't you dare come fooling around our camp again, and thank your lucky stars that Master Tad didn't make a mistake and shoot lower. Are you going, or are you waiting for me to throw you out?" fumed the Professor.

"I reckon I'm going. You'll hear from me again. Next time the shoe will pinch the other foot."

"It will be the foot that kicks you out of camp in that case," answered the Professor.

"Hooray!" howled the fat boy. "Three cheers for Professor Zip-zip!"

"Be silent!" thundered Professor Zepplin.

"Yes, you had better look out or he will take it out of you after Mr. Darwood has gone," warned Tad. "The Professor is all stirred up."

The Professor was. Darwood turned and strode from the camp without trusting himself to utter another word. Professor Zepplin strode back and forth with clenched fists, muttering to himself for five minutes after the departure of their guest.

"He called us thieves!" he exclaimed, halting and glaring angrily at Stacy.

"Well, don't blame me for it," answered the fat boy.

"Professor, calm yourself," begged Tad. "Those men have met with a lot of crookedness. You can't blame them. I shouldn't be surprised if some other person had been trying to follow them since they have been out this time. They probably think we are in league with the others to get ahead of them in the discovery of this treasure."

"I don't believe there is any treasure," raged the Professor.

"As to that, of course, I can't say, but I should think it quite probable that they had something definite. There must be something in what they have to go on. They are not fools, but intelligent men. What is more, they must think they are on the right track or they wouldn't fly off the handle as Darwood has done to-day. What will you do?" asked Tad.

"Do? Do? What do you think I am going to do?"

"Knowing you as I do, I should say you would go on as we have planned," answered Butler laughingly.

"Exactly! If that man thinks he can frighten us out of our course he will find that he has made a grave mistake."

"Why didn't you punch him when you had the chance?" demanded Chunky. "You could have hit him an awful wallop when his chin was in the air that time."

"Stacy! You are a savage!" rebuked the Professor.

"Maybe, maybe," reflected the fat boy. "But judging from some things that have occurred in this camp this morning, I'm not the only savage in the outfit."

The boys laughed uproariously.

"That's one for you, Professor," chuckled Ned.

"Anvik! We break camp at once," fairly snapped the Professor.

"Gold man him heap fool," grunted the Indian.

"No, not that, Anvik. He is gold-mad like all the rest of them," corrected Butler. "I hope I never shall get that way."

"It can't be such bad fun to be gold-mad," argued Stacy, who usually wanted the other side of an argument. "I'd like to try it once, if I could find enough gold to make it interesting."

Camp was hastily broken that morning, for there was much lost time to be made up. Everyone was eager to get started, anxious to find out what would be the outcome of the dispute with the gold diggers.

"We don't know in what direction they're going to move, while they do know our route," said Tad. "So it will be an easy matter for Darwood to watch us as long as he wants to keep us in sight."

At seven o'clock that morning Professor Zepplin gave the word to "mush." This morning the Professor was extremely silent, but there was a grim look to the corners of his mouth.

Exciting experiences lay before them all. The boys felt it in the very air about them.

The certainty made them feel buoyant and exhilarated. Surely this wild old Alaska was a great bit of country!

"I don't care how soon somebody starts something," mused Ned. "We have our heavy artillery well on ahead."

As he spoke he gazed smilingly at the tight-jawed Professor, who never looked to better advantage than when in warlike mood.

CHAPTER XX

TAD DISCOVERS SOMETHING

"I DON'T see our friends," said Ned, an hour later.

"They're not in their camp," answered Tad. "We passed that an hour ago. They have no horses, so they're packing their outfits on their backs."

"Huh! That's one part of the gold-madness that I don't want," said Chunky. "Do all gold diggers have to pack their outfits?"

"I guess few of them can afford to buy ponies," answered Butler. "Then, too, the places they go to are usually beyond the reach of anything except a wild animal. We are fortunate if we get through with our stock. Even our own ponies that we left at home would never be able to make this rough trail. What's that, Anvik?"

The guide was pointing to a waving ribbon of white that appeared to reach from point to point on the rocks high above them and some distance ahead.

"What is it?" demanded the boy.

"Him goat."

"Mountain goats? Look, boys!" cried Tad.

Stacy threw up his rifle and took a shot. Of course he missed. A leaping mountain goat is not an easy mark even for the best shot, and the fat boy, while shooting very well, could hardly be called an expert.

"Those are the animals from which the beautiful blankets are made," the Professor informed them. "Do you know how the Indians get the wool?"

"They pull it out by the roots, I guess," suggested Stacy.

"Hardly," laughed Ned.

"Spring is the shedding time. The goats, in leaping from place to place, leave tufts of wool clinging to rocks and bushes, and this the lazy Indians gather for their blankets, rather than take the trouble to hunt the goats."

"Squaw him get wool," spoke up Anvik.

"Worse yet," laughed Butler. "You are the laziest folks on earth."

"Squaw work, him no talk lies. Him mouth keep shut."

The boys laughed at this crude reasoning of the Indian.

"Did they teach you at the Mission to make your squaws work?" asked Tad Butler.

Anvik shook his head slowly. He did not an-

swer in words, but hastened his pony's pace by his heavy pull at the halter.

All that day the boys kept a lookout for smoke, but in vain. After they had made camp that night the Professor said:

"There are indications here of unusual formations. If you have no objections I should like to remain here for a day, perhaps two, and do research work."

"Right, Professor," replied Tad. "The ponies will be better for a rest, and maybe we can do some hunting. How about it, Anvik?"

"Anvik not care," was the guide's reply.

After breakfast the next morning the Professor set off at once.

"Now, fellows," said Tad, "I propose that Stacy and I follow that ravine to the left and Ned and Walter go to the right. From the formation I should say that some time late in the day we ought to meet. It's wild in those passes, and we should get game."

After arranging that three quick shots should announce the finding of game and that the distress signal of one shot, a pause, then two quick shots should be a call for help, the boys set off, each carrying biscuit, a drinking cup, and matches, besides their rifles.

The boys tramped all morning without sighting game.

After a short rest the two boys went on again, bearing more to the left. As they trudged on the sound of rushing water was borne to their ears. Then they came out on a broad stream, a torrent that came from the top of three lofty, ice-covered mountains.

"Let's work up toward that pass," suggested Tad, wishing to see the gulch from which the stream was flowing.

They had worked their way upstream for half a mile when Chunky yelled:

"Look there! What's that?"

Tad saw a hideous head projecting above the bushes. At first he was startled, then he laughed.

"That's a totem pole, Chunky. They're put up usually in behalf of the Indian dead to drive the spirits away. Let's go and look at it."

The totem pole was standing at the entrance of a second narrow gulch. Sand and shale rock were heaped up at the entrance.

"A stream flowed through here at one time, Stacy. I imagine that it was the same body of water we've just been looking at."

"Yeh," said Stacy absently. "Say, Tad, let's see who can first hit that evil-looking thing with a stone."

Tad laughed and stooped to pick up a stone. As he did so, he noticed an arrow cut into the

rock at one side of the gulch, the point of the arrow aimed up the gulch.

"That's queer," muttered the boy. "I suppose it's an Indian sign. This is a place of many mysteries." He stooped to pick up the rusty-looking stone that had caught his glance. It was worn full of holes as if by the action of water and when he took it in his hand its heaviness aroused his curiosity. Opening his knife, he dug into the stone.

Tad's face flushed a vivid red, and he uttered a sharp exclamation.

"What is it?" demanded Stacy.

"Nothing much. Maybe I've made a discovery. Don't let's idle here. Let's go on and see if we can't get our bear. This seems to be our lucky day," said the boy, pocketing the stone and once more shouldering his rifle. "Come, mush, as Anvik would say."

CHAPTER XXI

CONCLUSION

PROFESSOR ZEPPLIN had been closeted in his tent for an hour when he beckoned Tad Butler to enter.

"Boy, this rusty stone that you picked up is a gold nugget, worth, I should say, all of five hundred dollars!" cried the Professor excitedly. "Are there more of them, Tad?"

"I can't say. I found this one on a bar where it was probably washed down. The place was once a stream, but it changed its course and is now some distance to the west. I've an idea that there's gold in that sand-bar."

"Then we'd better go after it. It probably belongs to no one."

"I'm not sure of that. Others may have a juster claim than we have, Professor."

"You suspect something, Tad, without knowing fully. We'll look at the place and decide what to do later."

The others were in bed, but still awake when Tad left the Professor's tent, but to their questions he gave evasive answers.

It seemed to Tad that he had been asleep but a few minutes when he felt a touch on his shoulder. He sat up, instantly wide awake. Anvik was bending over him.

"Somebody come," muttered the guide. "One, two, three, four, maybe more."

Day was just breaking. Tad awakened his companions, giving each instructions as to what he was to do. Then he hurried to the Professor's tent to give Anvik's news.

"Look out!" yelled Stacy shrilly.

A series of quick, sharp reports punctured the stillness of the morning. Tad and Professor Zepplin dashed out, and so did Walter Perkins. Ned Rector and Stacy Brown were nowhere to be seen. Anvik stood against a rock, his blanket drawn about him, the muzzle of a rifle protruding from the lower end of it.

Four men appeared in the open, each holding a rifle. The rifles were aimed at the members of the Pony Rider outfit.

"It's Darwood!" gasped the Professor. It was Darwood, accompanied by Sam Dawson, Dill Bruce and Curley Tinker. "What's the meaning of this outrage, gentlemen?" he demanded.

"I gave you warning to mush back to where you came from," answered Darwood.

"And I told you we'd do nothing of the sort!"

"You're going now, and in a hurry!"

"What will you do if we refuse again?"

"You'll find out what we'll do. We're north of fifty-three now. You know what that means. Put down those guns, and do it quick."

"Suppose you set the example," said Tad quietly. He had not spoken up to this point.

"Keep still!" commanded Darwood. "Put down those guns."

"Don't be in a hurry," advised Tad. "Before you do anything that you'll regret, let me say that every man of you is covered. The slightest hostile motion on your part is your death warrant."

"The Indian's got away!" cried Dawson.

Darwood for the first time realized that all the Pony Rider outfit was not in sight.

"Either your friends will put down their guns and come out or we'll shoot," snarled Darwood, fixing his gaze on Tad Butler.

"Are you so anxious to die, Curtis Darwood?" asked the lad calmly.

Darwood flushed, but the four men lowered their rifles to the ground.

"Mr. Darwood, I have something to tell you. Sit down," went on the boy.

"I reckon we'll do nothing of the sort."

"Sit down, I say!"

The men obeyed reluctantly.

"Keep them covered until they come to their senses, boys," directed Tad. Then he went on to the men: "We don't blame you for feeling that every man's hand is against you; but I'm going to prove to you that ours are not. See this?" and Tad tossed to Darwood the rusty stone that he had found in the sand-bar.

"Gold! A nugget of pure gold," breathed Darwood. "Where did you get it?"

"Perhaps we found the Taku Pass."

"And we've lost it," groaned Dawson.

"We'll fight for it, then!" shouted Darwood.

"You might wait until there's need for fighting, Mr. Darwood," said Tad contemptuously. He then went on to describe the totem pole, while his listeners became more and more excited. They got out an old map, and after studying it Tad said:

"It is the Taku Pass that Stacy and I discovered. As it is undoubtedly yours, we relinquish all claim to the land."

"How much do you want for the relinquishment?" asked Dawson.

"Nothing. Sit down and have breakfast with us and then we will lead you to the place."

"I can't say much," said Darwood falteringly. "We've been a bunch of driveling idiots."

After breakfast Anvik was sent to the men's

camp for pans and implements and supplies, and the others set off in Tad Butler's wake to explore the gulch.

At one point the party found a slender vein of pure gold, enough to give hope that the vein broadened out farther on. Tad, in a cavelike niche, saw a gray streak of ore that reached for a long distance. A piece of this about the size of a goose egg lay at his feet. It was heavy, and he put it in his pocket to show to the others.

Anvik came in with the tools, surveying chains, and pans, and Darwood and the others staked off their claims, taking in enough to give each boy a claim, putting up heaps of stones to mark the boundaries.

"Of course, if anyone else were to file a prior claim we'd have a hard time to substantiate ours. But there's not much danger."

The claim staked, Darwood proposed that they pan in the bar to see what they could find. To the delight of all, sparkling particles of rich yellow dust lay in the bottoms of the sieves, and they felt convinced that there was gold in paying quantities.

Once more back in the camp, the Professor disappeared into his tent. When he emerged he looked excited.

"Boys!" he shouted. "Tad! Your sample

is platinum! Gentlemen, you have indeed a fortune! The platinum is worth about double its weight in gold!"

Such a hurrah as went up! Such an evening of rejoicing and excitement! But early the next morning came the reaction.

Tad, up early, went out to the claim, too impatient to await breakfast. To his amazement instead of finding the markers they had set, he found that they had been removed, and in their places some one had cut off saplings and marked the stumps of them with deep-cut notches.

"It's that rascal, Sandy Ketcham," declared Darwood in a strained voice, when Tad reported his discovery. "He's been on our trail for nearly three years, and now he's got us! He's on his way to Skagway now to register the claim in the land office," the man groaned.

"We'll get ahead of them, then," cried Tad. "He hasn't much of a start. When does a steamer leave Yakutat?"

"This is the twenty-third. The 'Corsair' will leave Yakutat on the twenty-seventh. He will just about make it."

"So will I," cried Tad Butler stoutly.

Tad won Professor Zepplin's consent to his plan, and after Darwood had got the papers ready and the boys had gathered provisions to-

gether, Tad was off, riding one pony and leading another, that he might change from one to the other, thus avoiding tiring either.

With lather standing out all over his mount, Tad pounded on, eyes and ears alight for Sandy Ketcham. He halted at noon to change horses and let each drink a little from a spring. Then on once more for seemingly countless hours.

There was a brief pause in the evening, to allow the ponies to rest and graze, then on again in the darkness. The second night a longer rest was imperative, while Tad fretted, tired as he was, to be off again.

On the third day he came across the still hot ashes of a campfire, and decided that he was not far behind Ketcham. Still twenty miles from Yakutat, one of the ponies strained a tendon. The boy was forced regretfully to abandon the animal and to go forward on the second mount.

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning of the fourth day that he caught sight of a column of black smoke through an opening between the mountains.

"It's the 'Corsair,'" he groaned. "She's getting ready to sail."

On and on he rode. He swept through the village on the panting pony and down to the dock to see the 'Corsair' weighing anchor.

Tad Butler set up a yell, then drove his pony

into the bay. No small boats were in sight, so, throwing himself in the icy water, he grasped the pony's mane and, swimming with the animal, headed for the ship.

The anchor was up, but Captain Petersen had not yet signaled for slow speed ahead. He ordered a boat lowered and Tad was hauled aboard in a semi-dazed condition. Relieved of its burden, the pony rose and swam for shore. Tad was confined to his cabin, worn out by the hard ride and the icy swim. But he learned that Ketcham was on board, and Ketcham, of course, knew of Tad's presence.

The morning of their arrival at Skagway was gray and windy. The sea was rolling into the harbor in heavy, boisterous swells. The captain announced that he would not put off a boat until the sea subsided, as capsizing was certain in the heavy seas.

Tad, impatient, was standing at the rail when he saw Sandy Ketcham leap over the rail into the sea. The boy did not hesitate. He sprang to the rail and dived as far out as he could, striking a rod or so behind Ketcham. Then began a desperate race. But youth won, and Tad staggered out of the water a few moments ahead of his adversary and ran for the land office, Ketcham close behind him.

"I file the claim to Taku Pass in the name of

Curtis Darwood and others," shouted Tad, slapping the oilskin parcel on the desk. "That man's an impostor. He destroyed our markers and erected his own on our claim."

"It's a lie!" yelled Sandy, making a leap for the boy.

There was a furious fight, in which the interested bystanders did not interfere. But at last Tad's fist shot up in a vicious uppercut on the man's chin, and Sandy Ketcham settled to the floor as the boy leaped out of the way.

"Have you filed the papers?" gasped Tad.

"Sure, boy! You've won the first round. The rest will be up to the government, but I guess you've got it clinched for all time."

When Tad returned to Yakutat three government surveyors went with him to run the lines and definitely establish the claim. Sandy Ketcham also filed a claim, but Tad's being the prior one the case would have to be decided by the proper government officials; though there was really no doubt of the outcome.

For a month after Tad Butler's return the Pony Rider Boys stayed at Taku Pass, panning over a section allotted to them by the Gold Diggers, each filling a small sack with yellow dust and a few nuggets. In addition the Gold Diggers insisted that the boys and their tutor jointly should have a twentieth interest in the

claims, which would undoubtedly give each a comfortable amount of wealth.

It was their last night in the camp and the boys and the Professor were talking over future plans.

"I'm going home to rest and study after my strenuous life of the last few seasons," the Professor stated. "How about you, Walter?"

"Father has a job for me as messenger in a bank in St. Joseph," answered Walter Perkins.

"Your turn, Chunky. What's it to be?"

"Banking. I'm going into Walter Perkins' father's bank."

"Does father know about it?"

"Of course he does!" retorted Stacy. "Did you think I was going to break into the bank?"

"Can't tell about you," laughed Tad. "As for Ned and me—Professor Zepplin's friend, Colonel Van Zandt, who has large timber interests, has used his influence to get us appointments in the United States Forestry Service. We'll go to work next spring. And now, fellows, I suggest that we give three cheers for the best fellow that ever lived, Professor Zepplin!"

The cheers were given with a will, then all went to their tents for their last night in their camp in Alaska.

THE END